Homelessness Prevention and Housing Associations – Contributing to Efficiency
Government efforts to prevent homelessness are having an effect. From a peak of over 147,000 cases in 2003 – the highest for ten years – acceptances have fallen consistently over the last two years. In 2005, the total number of acceptances dropped to 100,170 (http://www.odpm.gov.uk/pub/184/StatutoryHomelessness4thQuarter2005EnglandRelease_id1164184.pdf). But only continued preventative work will ensure that this downward trend continues. Such efforts also form part of the efficiency agenda – ensuring that best use is made of limited resources by helping people who have satisfactory accommodation to stay in it.

This paper will therefore consider how the work of housing associations in tackling homelessness prevention contributes to the wider efficiency agenda. Following discussions with contributing associations, we seek to draw out how the efficiency gains from tenancy management and other functions may be assessed, aiming to encourage further investment by associations in these key tasks.

The contribution of Housing Associations

Associations are making a valuable contribution to homelessness prevention, directly and indirectly, through:

• Partnerships with Local Authorities (LAs), providing temporary and permanent accommodation for homeless households;
• Providing good housing management and related support services to sustain tenancies;
• Working in partnership to tackle the causes of homelessness – addressing anti social behaviour, financial exclusion, and signposting to opportunities for education, training and employment.

Work by associations to prevent homelessness benefits individual households, the association and LA and other partners and leads directly to efficiency savings:

• The costs of failed tenancies and abandonment range from £4,000 to £10,500 per case.
  (Estimates from contributing associations)

The challenge is to demonstrate the importance of housing associations’ role as partners, but also to raise the standard and increase the focus to achieve more:

• If the largest 100 associations prevented the failure of an additional 10 tenancies each year, a potential collective saving of £4,000,000 to £10,500,000 could be achieved.

The paper also provides a showcase for some prevention work that reaches beyond core tenancy management, expanding the framework for evaluating costs and savings to estimate relative values. This may also encourage associations to look beyond core tasks to tackle the causes of homelessness and repeat homelessness.

Because the problems of homelessness, and the gains to be achieved from its prevention, are not confined to housing associations, the paper also aims to understand how homelessness prevention can benefit all of the bodies involved. The framework attempts to extend the evaluation of costs and gains to incorporate the benefits accruing to partners as well as directly to associations – to give a broad picture of the way that associations contribute to the wider efficiency agenda in public services.

Apart from demonstrating the value of the work associations are engaged in regularly, and the benefits that further initiatives can bring, it also aims to encourage greater engagement by LAs and other public sector bodies with associations in planning for housing and related services. This may be particularly valuable given the growing emphasis on Local Area Agreements (LAAs), with the focus on how to deliver strategically for local sustainable communities.
LAs have been set significant targets in relation to homelessness:

- meeting the target to keep homeless families out of bed and breakfast accommodation (except for an emergency, for a maximum of 6 weeks);
- keeping the level of rough sleepers down to as close to zero as possible and at no more than two-thirds of the number in 1998; and, more recently
- halving the number of households in temporary accommodation by 2010.

(see Sustainable Communities: Settled Homes; Changing Lives, ODPM, 2005)

The government set stretching targets in relation to homelessness because of its wide-ranging impacts on health, on the educational development of children and their long-term prospects, on crime and therefore on wider public services, not just housing.

**Wider impact of homelessness**

Homelessness is known to have impacts beyond the immediate housing issues, and to be linked to the need for supportive services to help people address the causes of homelessness, to avoid repeat cycles of homelessness. In that sense it is more than housing.

However, insecure or poor housing conditions, as well as actual rooflessness have wider social and economic impacts as well. Many studies have taken place into various impacts of homelessness, and on a range of groups affected by it. Common themes around homelessness emerge, including:

- loss of connection to support from friends and family networks
- physical and mental health impacts for adults and children
- disruption to schooling for children, and lack of space to play and study, impacting social and educational development
- worsening of existing problems, whether financial, health or addictions, leading to increased difficulty in returning to and maintaining a stable tenancy and lifestyle
- difficulties accessing employment
- increased risk of injury and being a victim of crime
- reduced life expectancy – for rough sleepers, the average life expectancy is 42.

(See also Health and Housing Good Practice Briefing, no.29, CIH 2004)

Apart from the obvious distress that such broad ranging impacts have on the homeless individuals or families, there are clearly implications for public sector services, and costs to public finances – in increased need for health services, social care involvement with children or older homeless people, police response to crime etc.

Housing associations are major partners in delivering these targets – not only by developing new homes of the right size in the right areas quickly and cost effectively, to house homeless households, but also by helping people at risk of homelessness to maintain their tenancies.
The importance of housing associations partnering and supporting LAs in the prevention of homelessness was reinforced by the publication *Effective Cooperation in Tackling Homelessness: Nomination Agreements and Exclusions*. (ODPM, Housing Corporation, Local Government Association and National Housing Federation, 2005) This was the start of a programme of work, disseminating good practice in partnership on homelessness prevention, which will encompass a number of measures, including:

- Cooperation in reviewing homelessness and developing and delivering local homelessness strategies and coordinating … with other strategies such as housing, Supporting People and Crime and Disorder Reduction Strategies.

- Housing management and care and support approaches that help people to sustain tenancies, reduce evictions and abandonment, and prevent homelessness. (p5)

The Housing Corporation’s Regulatory Code requires that housing associations, ‘when requested, and to such an extent as is reasonable in the circumstances, … provide a proportion of their stock for local nominations and as temporary accommodation for the homeless.’ (p23)

In a recent survey of LAs in England *Survey of English Local Authorities about Homelessness: Policy briefing no 13*, (ODPM, 2005) improving nominations agreements with associations was ranked as the third most significant out of six approaches to tackling the use of temporary accommodation (p32). The same survey revealed improved partnership working as a significant approach to LAs achieving their efficiency savings (p37).
Many associations are actively working with LAs to prevent homelessness. However, whether or not there is a specific initiative, homelessness prevention should be part of any good housing management system – as associations seek to ensure that their tenants can maintain their tenancies, and work with them to address any arrears and/or other risk factors such as anti-social behaviour. Homelessness prevention is a core function, even though it is not often recognised as such. There are significant advantages where it is an explicit part of the culture of an organisation – it can increase the focus and enlarge the vision for all staff on how prevention can better be delivered, encouraging innovative approaches.

**Case Study – New Charter Housing Trust**

Several innovative schemes undertaken by NCHT directly address homelessness and exclusion. Central to the Trust’s capacity to deliver these has been making the prevention agenda part of the culture of the organisation. This involves developing maturity in the organisation, building in the capacity to think laterally, creatively and in partnership. NCHT believes that the prevention agenda needs to be owned by the entire organisation and mainstreamed to make different initiatives sustainable.

Precisely because it should be part of the core function of housing management, from the initial stage of letting properties onwards, many associations do not look critically at how it is being delivered – in terms of the costs of the approach, and the effectiveness and quality of outcomes, and so there is limited exploration of potential alternative methods.
In a recent briefing, *Integrating Quality and Efficiency* (Housing Corporation and CIH, 2006), the good work of associations to date in achieving efficiency savings was highlighted, but so too was the challenging nature of the programme, requiring better value year-on-year. It called for the development of long-term efficiency strategies that focus on quality.

Ongoing reviews of core functions need to be built in to business and operational planning to ensure that the required quality outcomes are delivered, and to assess this against alternative delivery methods. In terms of housing management, this includes assessing for the outcome of tenancy sustainment, and delivery of the wider homelessness prevention agenda.

### Case Study – Manningham Housing Association

Manningham do not run specific initiatives to address homelessness prevention, but seek to do this through core activities, including lettings:

They have extended the access routes to their housing, with the aim of identifying and addressing hidden homelessness. Through this they aim to help hidden households into housing, before overcrowding can lead to relationship breakdown and result in homelessness. So in addition to the standard route to housing (generally those who are acutely overcrowded or homeless), there is also a community route and an economic route to housing – giving better opportunities for those seeking to give or receive support in the community or take up work. This came about following a review of allocations policy in 2002, and in direct response to feedback from BME customers.

It resulted in efficiency gains in that the team reduced by one FTE, in 2003/04. However, it also led to increased demand, as many who would struggle on as hidden homeless applied for housing. The team is therefore back up to original size but dealing with a greater number of applicants.
Prevention itself is an integral part of the efficiency agenda, although its value goes far beyond simply the efficient use of limited public resources. Homelessness prevention has been defined as:

‘...activities that enable a household to remain in their current home, where appropriate, or that provide options to enable a planned and timely move and help to sustain independent living.’


It is this working definition that is used in this briefing and includes action to help homeless households with a view to preventing repeat homelessness.

Many studies into homelessness are focused on particular groups or areas, and are limited in numbers, providing rich qualitative data on impacts of homelessness, but not wide scale quantitative information. Comparisons and aggregation from the studies is not possible because they also use differing methodologies. Research into the benefits of the Supporting People programme (Supporting People: Benefits Realisation of the Supporting People Programme, ODPM, 2004) has been one of some recent attempts to evaluate services designed to prevent homelessness or repeat homelessness for single people and families, as part of the wider work to evaluate the cost benefit of housing-related support, with a focus on the wider costs of homelessness.

The research report is backed up by several working papers, two of which relate to homelessness (working paper 2: single homeless people; and working paper 7: homeless families).

The papers model the impact of housing-related support by considering the success of interventions in preventing some of the outcomes that arise from homelessness. In doing so, the researchers had to make some working assumptions on the outcomes likely to arise from homelessness and the prevalence rate of occurrences amongst homeless households. These assumptions were based on the evidence of the existing research and discussions with government departments, and cover additional use of emergency and outpatients services, due to additional health problems and (for example) disruption in the access of homeless people to a GP.

ODPM has commissioned some primary research (http://www.york.ac.uk/inst/chp/Projects/familyhomelessness.htm) which will more fully inform calculations of actual costs, and the prevalence rates for additional health, social care, police and other services linked to homelessness. It will help LAs and partners, including associations, to target housing and wider support effectively, feeding into their delivery of homelessness prevention and efficient and effective use of public resources in so doing.

The working assumptions of the SP benefits research, and information from LA and other public agency partners can, in the meantime, inform associations in developing a framework to assess the efficiency of current activity to address homelessness prevention. How this framework is to be built up is discussed below.

(More on the costs of health and social care interventions can be found at http://www.pssru.ac.uk/uc/uc2005contents.htm.

In the first round of Annual Efficiency Statements, much of the focus was on cashable gains i.e. where inputs (for example; costs) are reduced but outputs remained the same. Some of this was due to uncertainty about understanding and measuring non-cashable gains.

As the challenges of delivering greater efficiency increase, it is likely that cashable gains will be harder to find and therefore the focus in terms of reporting efficiency will shift to non-cashable gains, including better quality services. There are difficulties associated with non-cashable gains, but methods exist to calculate the added value associations are delivering (explored in Integrating Quality and Efficiency).

Much of the homelessness prevention work by associations falls into these non-cashable strands of efficiency, either;

- E3 – getting greater outputs or improved quality for same inputs, or
- E4 – getting greater outputs or improved quality in return for an increase that is proportionally less than the increase in output.

The difficulty is in assessing a positive outcome through what is frequently a negative output (for example; no eviction, no police involvement, etc). Where homelessness prevention work is a success, the result is a tenant who may otherwise have been evicted, being sustained in the tenancy, and arrears being reduced, or anti-social behaviour decreasing. There is not only an outcome for the individual and the association, but also for the LA, with the prevention of a potential homeless presentation, and in some cases the avoidance of additional health, social care and police costs that studies have demonstrated can accompany homelessness.

So, how can associations begin to establish a framework for assessing efficiency in work they do to prevent homelessness? Without looking to develop such a framework, decisions about what initiatives to follow to strengthen the prevention agenda will be less clear and potentially less robust, hampering ongoing effectiveness and efficiency.

Although the current efficiency framework requires associations to look overall at management and maintenance costs as an area for efficiency gains, understanding the component parts of those costs, and drilling down to working out efficiency at that level may be necessary in the long term to deliver year-on-year efficiency savings.

A starting point therefore is to look at those component parts and know the costs to deliver, and assess against those costs the desired outcomes, how these are best measured and the savings arising from them for the organisation itself.

The first steps to developing a framework are to identify the management element and its costs, and the indicators to measure desired outputs from the function. This also applies to separate schemes or initiatives that may be run specifically to address homelessness.

The table on the next page looks at two examples which show how gains can be measured. A similar approach needs to be followed for whatever preventative measures are adopted.
Maximising tenants’ income, in order to ensure rental payment has always been a significant measure to address rent arrears and prevent it escalating to a level where the home is at risk. This is now being extended by some LAs and association partners to develop greater financial awareness and financial management skills amongst tenants, to provide greater security, improve their quality of life more widely and strengthen local economies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Management function</th>
<th>Costing</th>
<th>Output measure (Arising as a result of the function)</th>
<th>Efficiency identified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Welfare benefit Advisor</td>
<td>Employment costs and overheads attributable</td>
<td>Numbers of customers assisted/amount of extra welfare benefit secured</td>
<td>Costs associated with eviction multiplied by number prevented. Costs including:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tenancies sustained through intervention (e.g. a specific measure of intervention preventing eviction)</td>
<td>• Court costs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Decreased rent arrears</td>
<td>• Warrant fees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenancy Support Officer</td>
<td>Employment costs and overheads attributable</td>
<td>Tenancies sustained through intervention</td>
<td>• Staff time – average case management cost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Number of referrals to additional support services where needed (e.g. addressing substance misuse)</td>
<td>• Void work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Where possible, identification of evictions or abandonment avoided (rent levels or anti social behaviour addressed)</td>
<td>• Void rent loss (average per void)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Relet costs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reduction in rent arrears levels</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Above adapted from examples provided by NCHT and Prime Focus)

Maximising tenants’ income, in order to ensure rental payment has always been a significant measure to address rent arrears and prevent it escalating to a level where the home is at risk. This is now being extended by some LAs and association partners to develop greater financial awareness and financial management skills amongst tenants, to provide greater security, improve their quality of life more widely and strengthen local economies.

**Case Study – Telford and Wrekin**

The local authority and a number of association partners are involved in a scheme which shares the burden of rental debt between the homeless person, the association and authority. The housing association agrees to write off one-third of the debt, the LA covers one-third, and the final third is met by the homeless person via a credit union loan. This also allows for monitoring of any further financial stress (if repayment to the credit union is missed) and is linked to receiving advice and training.

**Case Study – NCHT**

The Trust has a fund to support a debt matching scheme, which includes a hardship fund. £5,000 pa in the fund is used to help those who are in rent arrears, matching payments up to an agreed maximum, aimed at those with large multiple debts. It is linked to a personal plan of positive action (taking up financial training, Skills for Life etc.) There is also the possibility for one off payments in cases of real hardship, which can be used to help those who are homeless access housing.

This initiative has widened into Money Information Network Tameside (MINT), which involves other landlords and is open to all residents of the borough: [http://www.mintameside.org.uk/](http://www.mintameside.org.uk/)

(For further examples and information on financial inclusion schemes and their role in supporting tenants, preventing homelessness and more, see *Life After Debt*, CIH, 2006).
**8 Including wider impacts in the framework**

Clearly the most important outcomes of prevention will be wider benefits to the homeless individual or household. However, these are likely to be the most difficult to quantify, but should nevertheless be considered in the overall efficiency framework. In particular they will form part of the improved quality that should be integral to services within the efficiency agenda. (A report from Crisis in 2003, *How Many, How Much? Single homelessness and the question of numbers and cost*, demonstrated the value of costing wider social and economic impacts).

There are also benefits for partner organisations, such as LAs, and some of these gains may be more amenable to estimation of value, and therefore count as efficiency gains. It is important that efficiency gains are not double counted, and therefore partners will need to agree where the gains should be recorded, but the framework could usefully highlight where an association’s action has contributed to the delivery of desired outcomes for its partners as well as itself, and cross reference to the appropriate record.

The framework can usefully be extended:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Management function/ Initiative</th>
<th>Costing (including identification of any contribution from partner/s)</th>
<th>Output measure (including any required by partners) Arising as a result of the function/initiative</th>
<th>Efficiency identified for RSL</th>
<th>Efficiency identified for partner agencies (to which initiative contributed)*</th>
<th>Other benefits (for RSL/partner/individual/household/wider community)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NCHT Young Peoples Project:</td>
<td>£42,000 capital refurbishment of units. SPgrant</td>
<td>Number of young people housed by the scheme/use of B&amp;B prevented. Number of planned move-ons</td>
<td>£15,600 per annum lost rental income £5000 per annum security shuttering on vacant units</td>
<td>Reduction in offending; indicative savings per offender – Young Offender Institution £52,000 p.a. Court costs – min. £500 per offence YOT interventions – c.£1000 per offence/breach B&amp;B costs to local authority (up to £280 per week per person) for 16/17 year olds.</td>
<td>Vulnerable young people get decent housing instead of B&amp;B Young people acquire life skills to become positive members of communities in which they live Reduction in nuisance/ ASB/ Crime. Positive integration in the local neighbourhood. Young people re-engaged with education/training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 units of low demand bedsit housing brought back into use as temporary supported housing for vulnerable young people age 16-20, many of whom at risk of offending. Partnership with Nacro Housing (specialist on-site support) and Tameside MBC (Supporting People revenue grant)</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

(Example from NCHT)

In this framework, to reflect real cost accurately, estimation of the time and resources spent developing effective working partnerships should also be incorporated.
Case Study – Community Housing Group

The association has a number of different initiatives that contribute directly to homelessness prevention. Included in these is a multi agency approach to anti social behaviour, alongside the use of injunctions. The association has developed strong links with the police and youth offending team, and case conferences involving schools and social services are also part of setting up support plans to address behaviour.

Partnership is critical to this delivery – at all levels within the partner organisations. A lot of time was invested to ensure the links were happening at frontline officer as well as management level, and it took several months to establish two key relationships to achieve the joint approach.

However, apart from the individual cases involved, it has also helped to attract in additional funding from the LA to improve security on the estate.

Where effective working partnerships are developed, there should be ongoing joint monitoring which in turn can inform the association’s, and partners’, awareness of the real impact of its interventions. This may also facilitate the estimate of cash equivalents for some of the quality outputs and, specifically, the value of the contribution made by the housing function/initiative (refining on the overall indicative saving given in the example above, see*).

Case Study – Mosaic

Mr X is 26 years old and experienced physical and mental abuse from a step family member, and also sexual abuse. As a result of his childhood history he became severely depressed and self harmed on a regular basis.

From adolescence he was continually in trouble with the police for petty offences. Eventually relationships within the family home broke down completely and he found himself homeless. He was housed in a number of bed and breakfast placements, running up arrears by neglecting benefit forms. At 18 years he married and had 4 children in 4 years. The pressures of supporting a young family and coping with his mental health problems led to a breakdown in the marriage; he was again homeless. This led to 3 suicide attempts resulting in hospital admission for 6 months.

Costs Associated with Mr X

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cost Description</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rent and council tax arrears</td>
<td>£2,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Court costs (eviction proceedings)</td>
<td>£550</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff time of Housing Officer</td>
<td>£472</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost of homelessness applications</td>
<td>£350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospital treatment for suicide attempts</td>
<td>£1,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 months in patient treatment</td>
<td>£27,888</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community mental health input</td>
<td>£1,296</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total cost</strong></td>
<td><strong>£34,656</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Floating Support Service

Mr X was referred to the floating support service, rehoused into a 1 bedroom flat and allocated a floating support officer, with continued input from the Community Mental Health team.

He received 2.9 hours of direct (1:1) support per week. The floating support team worked with him to reduce his debts, and he was given additional advice from the Citizens Advice Bureau. He was referred for counselling to help him deal with his history of abuse. The floating support officer, worked closely with Mr X, helping him to re-establish contact with his wife and children.

Mr X received floating support for 22 months, he managed to maintain his tenancy with no rent arrears, there were no suicide attempts and he has not self harmed for over a year. He has now successfully moved back into the family home and has been maintaining this for the past 7 months.
Assessment of homelessness prevention services of the size of Mosaic’s tenancy support service (supporting 250-300 people) can also usefully draw on the working assumptions on prevalence rates highlighted in the SP working papers above, to move beyond costing individual scenarios in this way, to an overall estimate of efficiency gains achieved through increased quality.

The above case study shows the extreme situation that some homeless households can experience, and the accompanying high costs personally and for society. However, even without the accompanying demands on health or social care services, estimates drawn from the contributing associations demonstrate that the costs of a failed tenancy can range from £4,000 to £10,500 per case. The cumulative savings resulting from preventative action by associations can therefore be very high.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cost Associated with the support</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Floating Support Workers Time</td>
<td>£5,110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHMT Time</td>
<td>£1,296</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estimated cost of counselling</td>
<td>£600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Cost</strong></td>
<td><strong>£7,006</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(costings for health interventions from Mosaic’s partner agencies)
The experience of LAs in developing homelessness prevention work indicates that, as there are multiple routes into and causes of homelessness, there needs to be a range of actions to address it. There are however, some commonly found triggers, the most significant or frequent of which are:

- family/friends who are unable/unwilling to house
- relationship breakdown
- end of assured shorthold tenancy.

The survey of LAs on issues around tackling homelessness (Policy Briefing 13, as above) demonstrated that most had around eight or nine different initiatives aimed at addressing homelessness. Rent deposit / bond schemes were the most common, and choice based lettings schemes were identified as the most common measure LAs were planning to introduce.

The importance of providing a range of services to address the immediate incidence of homelessness, and the longer-term causes and impacts was also underlined by several of the case study associations.

**Case Study – Focus Futures**

Focus Futures, the care and support business unit of Midland Heart, provides tenancy support services across a range of needs, for tenants for Focus Housing, the LA and other social and private sector landlords. It provides back up to these services with a range of other ‘wrap around’ projects. In Birmingham, many are based in the Homeless Services Centre, which also includes drop in housing advice, drug workers and a drug treatment surgery, the Birmingham Bond Scheme, refugee support worker, specialist advisors working with offenders, and street outreach services to rough sleepers. Many of these services sit within a strong framework of partnerships.

It recognises the importance of easy access housing advice, and the link to tenancy support – an emergency intervention at a point of crisis for someone accessing housing advice can then be a referral into tenancy support. This can help to move that person from a pattern of crisis intervention to more regular tenancy support.

**Case Study – Centrepoint**

Centrepoint has a Support and Development Approach to addressing homelessness and exclusion among young people. It provides packages of services, looking at young people in the round and addressing key spheres of

- Housing;
- Health;
- Learning; and
- Income and work.

This approach has led to an increase in people successfully moving on from supported accommodation, and satisfaction with the service.

Partnerships to prevent homelessness also usefully extend beyond public sector agencies to voluntary and community groups, bringing valuable resources to local bodies that might otherwise struggle for funding, enabling services to extend to groups that may be harder to reach, and supporting mainstream services as well.
Case Study – Swale Housing Association

As well as in house rent arrears management, Swale HA addresses homelessness prevention by supporting several voluntary groups with grants. These include:

- Local CAB
- Victim Support
- Mediation service
- A local independent housing advice service.

In return for funding, Swale can refer tenants to these services, promotes them amongst tenants, and receives quarterly monitoring reports.

For example, monetary contributions to CAB of £7,500 per year over 2004/2005 and 2005/06 have enabled them to retrieve £74,196 from the Housing Benefit Department on behalf of Swale’s tenants. The same level of grants to Housing Aid and Advice have enabled them to retrieve £53,367 from the Housing Benefit Department.

Swale is part of the Amicus group, which also provides tenancy support through Crowbridge, and private sector leasing through Avenue Lettings. In the service level agreements established with LAs for PSL schemes, any surplus is channelled directly back into further prevention services. In one area, it has been used to fund a resettlement officer, who will:

- Provide intensive support for the first six weeks of the tenancy, visiting every week;
- Ensure all possible action is taken to sustain tenancy (accessing benefits etc), and
- Refer on for additional support (e.g. to Crowbridge) where support hours are available.

However, other associations may choose not to deliver this range, or may lack the capacity to do so. Acting in partnership with LAs, providing lettings to homeless households, solid housing management to support tenancy sustainment, and linking into / supporting local voluntary groups in initiatives remain vital links in the prevention agenda in the locality, and contribute to the wider efficiency agenda in making best use of limited public resources. Where associations do move into developing other initiatives, it is important to maintain effective delivery in and quality of these core functions as well.

Case Study – West Country HA

Working across 17 LAs in an area with high affordability issues, many new lettings are to homeless households. The association sought to engage with LA partners through the housing options teams, to tackle potential repeat homelessness. Where the association’s own intervention regarding rent arrears early on, using the in house welfare benefits advisor or referrals to local agencies, has not addressed the problem, they have an agreed protocol with one LA to work jointly with an officer from the housing options team, looking at other routes to tackle the problem, but also to reinforce the real risk should the tenancy be lost due to rent arrears.
In the increasingly challenging context of striving for efficiency gains, this briefing paper has aimed to encourage associations to keep focused on delivery of quality services. As the range of examples from the case study associations demonstrates, homelessness prevention is a core element of good housing management. The government is clear that the efficiency agenda is about making better use of limited public resources, in order to provide increased investment in front line services – including further development of homelessness prevention services, in partnership with others, delivering benefits for public services and most importantly, homeless households.
More information on ways to tackle homelessness and building homelessness prevention will be available later in 2006, including the outcomes from ODPM’s evaluation of current homeless prevention initiatives, and the research into the impacts of homelessness on families and young people. Both of these initiatives were part of the Government’s commitment to ongoing prevention in Sustainable Communities: Settled Homes; Changing Lives (ODPM, 2005).

ODPM have recently issued a update on the strategy; Sustainable Communities: settled homes; changing lives – one year on, policy briefing number 14. (2006).

ODPM also issued Improving the Effectiveness Of Rent Arrears Management: Good Practice Guidance, 2005.

The Housing Corporation’s Gold Award includes the theme of homeless prevention, and the shortlist is available at http://www.housingcorp.gov.uk/server/show/ConWebDoc.7306/changeNav/431

The winners of the Gold Award will be announced in May 2006, and there will be a programme of dissemination by the winners, in partnership with the Housing Corporation and CIH over the following 9 months.