Homelessness Prevention Trailblazer

In-depth case reviews – a brief guide

Introduction and purpose

Through Newcastle's Homelessness Prevention Trailblazer programme we have developed a more case-based and reflective approach to understanding the needs of residents and our responses to those needs. We have done this as part of our continuous learning about the experiences of residents and how we respond, to inform changes to policy and practice with the aim of improving those experiences for both residents and frontline practitioners. In this context, a case relates to a resident (or household) who has received advice and / or support from a service over a period of time which we have records of to review. As such, this guide forms part of our work to 'improve our collective understanding', one of the four key themes of our Homelessness Prevention Trailblazer.

In-depth case reviews are a natural extension of exception reporting; one of the principles that underpins the Active Inclusion Newcastle partnership approach. In Newcastle City Council's Active Inclusion Service, we classify exceptions as when:

- a protocol or procedure hasn't been followed
- an opportunity to prevent crisis or intervene earlier has been missed
- there is a structural issue meaning that there is no 'solution' for an individual

In practical terms, exception reporting is routinely using case-based practice to identify when and why services and support have failed to prevent homelessness, and using feedback loops so that those cases not only improve practice but contribute to wider learning to prevent further instances and to improve the system to prevent homelessness.

We have extended this principle through the Homelessness Prevention Trailblazer work to more comprehensively explore and provide recommendations on cases that highlight certain issues or where there are certain themes. Our Homelessness Prevention Trailblazer multidisciplinary team have time for reflective practice built into their operating model. In its simplest form, this means thinking about (or reflecting) on what they are doing to help both ourselves and the wider system to learn from those experiences – considering and discussing what the team, and others, have done and what happened, and deciding from that what could be done differently and what has been learnt.

Carrying out in-depth case reviews has maximised the opportunities of having both additional capacity funded through the Homelessness Prevention Trailblazer and an operating model which has reflective practice built into it. As well as getting a better understanding of these issues and, subsequently, being able to make more informed recommendations for policy and practice changes, one of our aims is to provide learning and a methodology to share with others. This includes internal and external partners in Newcastle's homelessness prevention system and other areas, as part of the resources we are sharing at the end of the Homelessness Prevention Trailblazer programme which are available online at www.newcastle.gov.uk/homelessnesspreventionforprofessionals.

The process

This document aims to provide an introduction to when conducting an in-depth case review may be appropriate, and the key steps involved in undertaking a review. By its very nature, the guidance offered in this document is general and must be adapted to meet the exact focus of the review, as well as the practical constraints on time and resources under which the review takes place.

The most important thing to remember across all in-depth case reviews is that you must be able to sufficiently evidence everything you are drawing out of it with specific examples from individual cases. You must also be transparent about all of the limitations in your review, either with the data you are using or in the process you have undertaken.

1. **Identifying an opportunity for an in-depth case review:** It is difficult to give an exact explanation of how to identify cases for review as it will depend on the focus of the particular service area. However, there are some broad indicators for when an in-depth case review could aide understanding and service or system change:

    - **Exploring anecdotal trends:** As frontline practitioners work with residents over time they will pick up on trends across cases. These trends may be in the form of similarities between different household needs or re-occurring issues with a particular service, a referral mechanism or a more general issue with a system. Ideally, these trends should be systematically captured through structured opportunities for reflective practice. In turn, identified trends can offer a useful starting point for deeper exploration. However, at this stage, it should be acknowledged that they are only anecdotal. Before conducting a more in-depth review, it is necessary to first quantify that trend by identifying how many other cases it may apply to. For example, if an anecdotal trend is identified around "a lot" of residents being threatened with homelessness from a particular landlord, it is essential to find out, through the relevant databases, the actual number of households who have presented as threatened with homelessness

    - **Interrogating the numbers:** We systematically capture quantitative data through our respective databases and, in the Active Inclusion Service, analyse these through our quarterly review cycles. These numbers can offer a 'stepping off' point for in-depth case reviews. Generally, we should be looking for changing trends (e.g. the number of residents requiring a Debt Relief Order has increased this quarter) or anomalies that go against broad trends (e.g. a small number of cases who have been in temporary accommodation for a significant period of time). The general rule is to look closely at the numbers, comparing with what has happened in previous quarters and identifying anything that seems surprising

    Once an opportunity for an in-depth case review has been identified, it is necessary to relate those numbers to individual households. These households form the 'population' for your review.

2. **Defining the objectives of the review:** In identifying an opportunity for an in-depth case review, you should have also identified the broad aim of the review, including what the information will be used to inform and how, particularly as this can influence the duration and nature of the review. Defining the objectives is then about focusing in on exactly what you want to explore in looking in-depth at cases. You could also formulate these objectives as questions. For example, if there are residents who have been in temporary accommodation for a significant period of time then you may want to ask, 'what are the barriers to them moving on from this form of accommodation?' and 'why were they placed in temporary accommodation in the first place?'

3. **Setting the parameters of the review:** Defining the objectives of the review should also help set the parameters of the review. Parameters can mean a number of different things depending on the exact focus of your in-depth review, but generally will be about how many cases from the overall ‘population’ you choose to look at in-depth, who these cases are and why you have chosen them. You will also need to decide how far you look back in the history of each case and how broad you go in terms of the different sources of data you use. All of these parameters will be determined by the aim and objectives of your review, as well as practical constraints such as time and resources. In turn, the aims and objectives of the review will be influenced by the focus and desired audience for the review (e.g. a regular governance meeting)

4. **Identifying sources of data:** The sources of data you use for your review can be numerous, but most commonly they will include case notes and monitoring information, such as outputs and outcomes, on relevant databases. These should be supplemented by the reflections of the frontline practitioners who have worked on the case to provide greater context and understanding of the connections and relevance of different data sources. Deciding which sources of data to include will be determined by the objectives of your review (e.g. if you’re looking at homelessness among individuals who are leaving care, for comprehensiveness you will need to include Social Care records and case notes in your review). Finally, it will probably be the case that you will identify new sources of data that need to be included once you’ve started looking at cases in more detail

5. **Collating and ordering your data:** Including data from numerous sources can be unwieldy, making it difficult to make sense of what happened in each case. It is for this reason that it’s important to collate and order your data. The most common way to collate your data is by each individual case included in your review. The relevant data from that case can be brought together into a central point, either in a single document / spreadsheet or in one particular database. At this stage, it’s important to ensure that you password protect any documents containing personal information, saving them in secure files within the council’s secure network

   Either after or during the collation of data, you need to order the data to help you get a clearer picture of exactly what has gone on. This becomes particularly important when you’re reviewing data from different data sources, which will usually be presented from different perspectives (e.g. from different professions who provide different functions). Often the best way to do this is to order the data chronologically from the time you decided to go back to (as decided when you set your parameters) to the present

6. **Identifying themes:** Once the data is collated and ordered chronologically, it’s advisable to take a break or do something else before returning to the collated and ordered data at a later point. When you come back to it, read the entire chronology and make notes separately on any themes you identify in that particular case, as related to the objectives of your review. You should do this for each individual case before comparing the themes, so you have a list of these. For example, if you were looking at long stays in temporary accommodation and the objective was to look at the barriers to moving on, the themes would be particular types of barriers that are emerging in that case. By comparing across cases, you are already creating a list of common barriers to moving on from temporary accommodation

7. **Categorising the data:** Once you’ve identified your themes, you need to go back to each case to start categorising the data against your themes. You do this by indexing

or coding. The easiest ways to do this are to either attach key word comments to particular ‘chunks’ of text, to highlight using different colours for different themes, or to make notes in the margin. For example, if a common barrier to moving on was a previous arson conviction you could highlight every reference to this in blue or make a key word comment of ‘arson conviction’ next to every reference. Doing this means you have specific examples in each case for each of your themes, allowing you to add them up and see which themes were most common across the cases you’ve looked at

8. **Identifying transitions and ‘turning points’:** As well as identifying themes, it’s important to look for key transitions or ‘turning points’ in cases and to examine these particularly closely. These transitions and turning points are generally points at which things either improved or got worse (e.g. the point at which someone became homeless or became threatened with homelessness). Once you’ve identified these points, look in very close detail at what happened before and after this point. You should do this for each case, making notes for each before comparing across the cases, looking for similarities or differences

9. **Going back to your objectives and aims:** By this point, you should be very familiar with the cases you have looked at, having identified a number of common themes across the cases, identified which themes were most common, and identified the key turning points in each of the cases. You now need to return to your objectives and reflect on how your in-depth review has allowed you to meet these objectives (or answer these questions if you have phrased them this way). In doing so, you should naturally meet the overall aim of your review

10. **Writing up, discussing and presenting your findings:** One of the main differences between the everyday process of exception reporting (to highlight problems) and in-depth case reviews is the process of writing up the findings so that they can be used to inform policy and practice and to, hopefully, effect change. Before presenting your findings to the relevant ‘decision-maker’, as identified by defining the objectives of the review, they should be discussed and reviewed with some of the relevant frontline practitioners. This is both to check accuracy, given the summarising of detailed information involved in the process, and to get their contributions to the conclusions and recommendations to acknowledge their knowledge and experience in the area

Next steps

This methodology has been tested in the work of the Homelessness Prevention Trailblazer multidisciplinary team. We are extending this approach beyond the end of the Homelessness Prevention Trailblazer funded period (which ended on 31 March 2019), using additional funding secured through Newcastle City Council’s Life Chances fund. This will enable us to explore in more depth the trends that emerge from the multidisciplinary team’s periodic review process. We also intend to test the use of this methodology as a complementary addition to our current review processes, such as our quarterly homelessness reviews.

Contact officers

Claire Horton, Service Improvement Lead – Active Inclusion, Newcastle City Council
Tel. 0191 211 6049 Email claire.horton@newcastle.gov.uk

Chris Parker, Senior Active Inclusion Officer, Newcastle City Council
Tel. 0191 211 5346 Email christopher.parker@newcastle.gov.uk