



A QUESTION OF VULNERABILITY

Single homeless vulnerable people and access to social housing

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Introduction

This paper is concerned with vulnerable single homeless people and their experience of accessing social housing. It argues that there are fundamental problems with the system, which need to be addressed in order for it to be a more effective safety net for the people that it is designed to help. The paper addresses current policy issues and draws on a small sample of recent telephone interviews with providers of services to homeless people in the voluntary sector.

Policy context

Legislation providing for a route into housing for certain groups of homeless people has been in place since 1977. In relation to single people homelessness per se has never conferred a right to housing. The legislation designates priority groups who are considered to be more vulnerable when homeless and more in need of assistance. Under the previous legislation this included people with dependent children, pregnant women, people who are vulnerable as a result of old age, mental illness or handicap or physical disability or other special reasons. People who are made homeless as a result of an emergency such as a fire or a flood also had a right to housing. These categories have been expanded under the Homelessness Act 2002 and now also include 16 and 17 year olds, young people leaving care, people who are vulnerable as a result of leaving institutions and those fleeing domestic, racial or other forms of violence.

This expansion of categories has been widely welcomed by the homelessness sector as has the legislation as a whole. Particularly welcome is the requirement on local authorities to produce homelessness strategies outlining their plans to tackle homelessness in their area. One of the flaws is that there is little new social housing accompanying this change in legislation and that social housing continues to be lost to private ownership through the right to buy. The consequence of this may be that local authorities will feel forced by shortage of stock to use their policy and practice to further ration access for vulnerable groups.

The government's aim, with varieties of emphasis across different political administrations, has been to strike a balance between the needs of homeless people and the limited supply of social housing, keeping the demand within manageable limits.

Methodology

Crisis aimed to get a snapshot of current practice in assessing and addressing the needs of vulnerable single people. In addition to Crisis' first hand knowledge of what happens to homeless people, and of current research this paper draws on a telephone survey carried out in July/August 2002. The researcher used a semi-structured questionnaire to elicit information about agencies and their clients' experience of using the local authority homelessness route to access social housing.

Eighteen representatives from hostels, day centres and advice services were interviewed. Eleven projects were London-based and seven were outside London.

The single vulnerable population

There are no accurate figures on the single homeless vulnerable population. Crisis estimates the hidden homeless population of England at 400,000. This includes hostel dwellers, people sleeping on friends' and families' floors, squatters and people in overcrowded accommodation. The number of decisions made by local authorities on homeless applications in the first quarter of 2002 was 66,740. This includes single people and people with children and the figures are not broken down. A large piece of research (O'Callaghan, 1996) carried out across nine local authorities in England between 1992 and 1995 with a cohort of 2,500 applicants found that single applicants (including couples) without children accounted for 41% of all applicants. This gives an indication of the likely numbers of single people applying.

We know that many single vulnerable people do not apply for local authority housing and that many that do are not successful. We know this partly because the hidden homeless population is full of single vulnerable people. People who have run away from home at a young age following neglect or abuse, people with drug and alcohol dependencies, people with emotional and mental health problems, people with challenging behaviour and people without supportive networks of family and friends. Some of these people are supported by homelessness agencies, others are lacking any support networks.

It is particularly important that the process of applying to the local authority as a vulnerable person should work better for people who are isolated and do not have advocates.

Rationing in the system

The homelessness legislation in itself is a rationing device seeking to divide the needy homeless from the less needy.

***'A person is vulnerable if they are "less able to fend for themselves when homeless, or in finding and keeping accommodation, so that he or she would suffer injury or detriment, in circumstances where a less vulnerable person would be able to cope without harmful effects.'* Homelessness Act 2002**

Homelessness agencies, with their knowledge of the law and their practical experience operate a filter system and make an assessment themselves of whether people will get through the system. Many people are discouraged from making an application as agencies are aware of the negative impact of the experience of rejection or because agencies recognise that the final outcome will not be accommodation that is suitable for their client.

'When they wouldn't be accepted they aren't referred.'

'We don't refer people who don't present with significant problems.'

'We wouldn't refer a client if they have no illness or children.'

'Clients aren't referred to the local authority if they are not believed to be capable of living alone.'

One of the major concerns expressed by agencies was about people who are vulnerable due to a combination of factors. People who have multiple needs, which do not fit neatly into the defined categories but when aggregated together clearly make them vulnerable, are likely to be excluded from being accepted as in priority need. People who are particularly likely to be excluded are people who have

suffered physically and mentally from the impact of rough sleeping, people with emotional and behavioural problems but without a diagnosis of mental ill health, and drug and alcohol users. The new Homelessness Code of Guidance 2002 does have a paragraph alerting authorities to the vulnerability that may arise for a combination of factors including a lack of dependable family and friends. This is welcome and it is hoped will have an effect on practice in this area.

It is clear from a number of studies that many homeless people never approach the local authority about housing. They may feel they are unlikely to be accepted, they may not want the housing that is on offer, they may feel stigmatised or discouraged by what they have heard about the process of application.

As Evans (1999) states 'When resources are scarce, services are often provided, either consciously or unconsciously, in ways which will discourage clients from applying.'

The supply and demand factor is an important one and there is evidence that where there is a good supply of social lettings the legislation is likely to be interpreted more liberally than in areas where there are very real constraints on housing.

However there are important aspects of practice which should not be defined by how much available stock an authority has.

The application process

The telephone interviews revealed a lot of dissatisfaction in how the process of assessing single vulnerable people is carried out in many authorities. A major issue was feeling that people did not get a proper assessment and that due processes were not carried out and reasons not given for decisions that are made. People who are homeless are not familiar with the legislation and don't know what criteria are being used. If the right questions are not asked the information is not elicited and they can be simply turned away.

'The local authorities main interest is to get them out of the door as quickly as possible. Sometimes they don't even do an assessment.'

'We have to chase up the reasons for refusal; they're not volunteered. Most clients don't even get final decisions.'

'The main problem clients face is "not being heard". They are often unable to get an assessment, it appears that when they turn up and approach the HPU a good proportion of the time they don't feel they've been given a formal assessment.'

'They don't actively search for vulnerability, they wait for the client to tell them and prove it. Clients are often sent away before even making the application.'

'They are told to leave before they even get a decision so that we can't appeal the decision.'

An excessive demand for documentation was also experienced by a number of agencies. It is particularly difficult for homeless people with chaotic and mobile lifestyles to provide documentary evidence. Homeless people find it difficult to access registration with GPs, therefore even basic medical evidence from someone with a knowledge of their history can be difficult to obtain.

'People are asked to produce bits of paper that no one could be expected to produce, a letter from a friend they bumped into and stayed with for a few nights. This is especially difficult for those with mental health issues and chaotic lifestyles. People are sent to get one thing, they take it in and are sent back to the day centre with a letter demanding another bit of paper, repeatedly.'

A 1999 Shelter study drawn from evidence from 50 of their housing aid centres found that 86% reported problems for homeless people in proving their vulnerability.

The O'Callaghan Study (1996) found that in response to the increase in homeless applications authorities had required more documentary evidence of an applicant's situation and undertook more thorough investigations. This discourages people from applying as well as increasing withdrawal and rejection rates.

Staff attitudes

The O'Callaghan study reported by Evans (1999) found that 45 % of clients interviewed were dissatisfied with the way the council had handled their application and for 41% the uncaring attitude of staff was the main reason. These findings were echoed by our telephone interviews.

'Clients claim HPU staff have been rude and made them feel ashamed they're homeless.'

'lack of support, offhand manner, treated like a pest instead of someone in need.'

'Staff need training in all areas from manners to knowing their law and their duties.'

These comments were not universal and were countered by some that said that local authorities were very helpful

'The LA are very good at supporting people through applications.'

'All clients are referred so that those who are not eligible for accommodation at least get advice and assistance, they are also recommended to join the waiting list.'

The local authority has a duty to offer advice and assistance to all people who are homeless. This duty has been strengthened under the Homelessness Act 2002.

A process which makes single vulnerable people feel they are a nuisance is clearly a process in need of reform.

The need for advocacy

Many of the agencies reported that they felt that clients needed accompanying to the Homeless Person's Unit and supporting through the process. Without support it was felt that many fell at the first hurdle and got sent away at reception without an interview. Clients need help in understanding the system in filling in forms, in articulating their needs and presenting their case.

'The support we give is often accompanying them to the office, they are not able to articulate or fully understand what is being asked of them, especially those with mental health difficulties. Also they need help with paperwork as many have no basic literacy skills.'

'We have some workers who can accompany clients to the HPU although resources for this are limited. We do advocacy over the phone and fight with people at the HPU.'

'It's a completely different story if clients are accompanied.'

This is obviously of particular concern in relation to the large numbers of hidden homeless people who do not have anyone to advocate for them or support them through the process.

Support needs

There is an inherent contradiction in the system of social housing and priority need. People can only be housed if they are 'less able to fend for themselves'. When they are assessed as vulnerable the assessment is generally not used to plan their support needs and enable them to become better able to sustain a tenancy. The assessment is simply done to determine whether they meet the criteria. Then they are placed in housing where their support needs are not met. If they do not manage to sustain a tenancy and become homeless again they can be refused help on the grounds of intentional homelessness.

'Clients with a history of chaotic drug use are often not housed. If they are housed they get the most unsuitable accommodation. A previous messed up tenancy is a big problem.'

'Mostly the accommodation is unsuitable; they get hostels where all sorts of stuff is going on that they just can't deal with.'

'They get nothing as far as I know, the local authority offers no ongoing support.'

There is good practice and in some authorities there are vulnerability panels which are multi disciplinary and where an assessment is carried out and a support package planned at the same time. In areas covered by funding from the Homelessness Directorate there are specialist teams helping with resettlement. Appropriate help on offer was the experience of the minority of the respondents to the telephone survey.

'Once you're in the system the support provided isn't too bad, particularly if you fall under another agency, such as social services, child protection, medical social workers etc.'

'There are CAT (Contact and Assessment Teams) and TSTs (Tenancy Sustainment Teams) and other workers can offer long-term counselling and support.'

'Following resettlement, support is offered by the resettlement team for up to six months, but the workers have large case loads so their involvement can be limited.'

Where the issue is housing vulnerable people ongoing support should be standard practice.

Alongside the need for support there are also issues about the quality of housing that vulnerable single people are placed in, both temporarily and permanently. Shelter (1999) report that 78% of their projects reported vulnerable tenants being offered inappropriate permanent accommodation. Usually one offer only is made and it may be unsuitable in terms of the type of accommodation, the location or the lack of formal support or informal networks of friends and family.

'A common problem is when people refuse the accommodation they are offered. In S in particular most housing is in large estates, which can be problematic for vulnerable people.'

'What they have on offer is very limited. People often turn down accommodation rather than move to a hostel or B&B 30 or 40 miles away.'

'People are often referred to hostels in other towns because B does not have much provision.'

To be placed in a Bed and Breakfast in another town miles away from any existing support networks exacerbates existing mental health problems and isolation and is not going to help any vulnerable person in their move towards independent living.

There is a clear need for standardisation nationally and an acceptance that when someone is assessed as vulnerable their support needs are assessed and a support package put in place.

Recommendations

Scrutiny of the process

Procedure for assessing vulnerable homeless people need to be improved.

- More appropriate assessment tools need to be developed so that the right questions are asked to elicit the information.
- HPU managers should ensure that the environment is a welcoming one and that interviews are carried out in a sympathetic manner. The manner in which the assessment is carried out should not be used as part of the rationing process.
- Previous failed tenancies should alert officers to probable unmet support needs and not to a decision on intentional homelessness.
- Proper decisions with reasons should be given to all applicants.

Priority need assessment

The needs of vulnerable single homeless people need to be better recognised and catered for.

- There should be explicit recognition of multiple needs which combine to make a person vulnerable

- Evidence from voluntary sector agencies working with homeless people and the word of the applicant should be given more credibility instead of demanding documentary evidence for everything.

Support needs

Housing is only part of the solution to homelessness.

- Every assessment of vulnerability should feed into a plan to address the person's support need with a package of care that will help them to sustain a tenancy for as long as they might need that help.

References

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