

Housing Plus Academy Policy Workshop

Innovative approaches to housing vulnerable and socially excluded people

10th July 2019, London School of Economics

Headlines

1. There has **been a sharp increase in homelessness** due to changes in the benefit system, the introduction of Universal Credit and increased evictions from the private rented sector caused by insecure tenancies. **The ending of a private tenancies is now the single biggest cause of homelessness in England.**

There are many organisations of varying sizes using innovative methods to tackle homelessness across the country. Knowledge and learning needs to be shared across the sector and between organisations.

2. **In many cases those experiencing homelessness are often dealt with in an intrusive way that focuses on their problems, rather than looking for strengths.** The current system therefore often fails to address the root causes of homelessness.
3. **Social Landlords can play a key role in helping prevent and tackle homelessness.** Firstly, Housing Associations need to work with tenants to help them to stay in their homes. Secondly, they need to focus on protecting and increasing the stock of social rented housing so that there is a real alternative to private renting. Insecure tenancies and high rates of turnover make it hard for people to build local relationships, as people are often forced to move away from their friends, family and support networks. This makes people more vulnerable when threatened with debt, family break up or eviction.
4. There needs to be a range of services to be able to help the variety of needs that people experiencing homelessness may have. **Specialist services** such as those working with women can give the targeted support that homeless women may need, for example when fleeing domestic abuse. Specialist services are particularly important at 'crisis point' but they need to also offer continuing support. The learning from specialist services can usually be fed into general services.
5. **Hostels meet an important need in providing emergency accommodation.** Many offer support as part of a pathway to more permanent solutions.
6. The **Homeless Reduction Act** was introduced in 2017, placing new duties on Local Authorities to prevent homelessness. Councils have responded to the Act with a variety of measures. Although the Act was controversial, it won cross-party support. Government offered special funds to Local Authorities with the biggest homeless problems, willing to pioneer new approaches:
 - The increased need for temporary accommodation means that some councils are buying back ex council properties.
 - Councils are working with private landlords to incentivise landlords to accept tenants in emergencies. Councils have tenancy sustainment teams to help both private landlords and tenants avoid evictions caused by the build-up of arrears.

- Councils have realised that in order to tackle homelessness, housing departments and outside organisations need to work together. Some local authorities, including Islington and Greenwich, have set up forums where different departments and outside organisations come together to share ideas and experience, and to shape policy. Cheshire West and Chester Council have set up “*Outside In*”, a collaboration of organisations, including local businesses, voluntary groups and faith groups, working together to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping.
 - Using information more systematically helps councils to identify people at risk of homelessness so that they can intervene earlier. For example, identifying those who are struggling to pay their rent and offer support by helping people to maximise their income; or helping them with the complexity of Universal Credit.
 - Some councils have transformed their housing access service to provide a more ‘open door’ approach to potentially homeless applicants. Some councils still struggle to get people to seek help early enough despite the involvement of gatekeepers. Some councils use outreach services to try to break down these barriers.
 - A very innovative approach is to dedicate Council staff to contacting private landlords when a potentially homeless applicant is under eviction notice. Many private landlords can be persuaded to stop the eviction if the council offers support to the tenant.
7. **Housing First is an important way to help tackle homelessness.** Housing First provides private rented accommodation to former rough sleepers alongside personal support to help people stabilise lives and sustain a home. This open-ended approach piloted in several Local Authority areas, is proving very successful.
 8. Psychologically Informed Environments (PIE) in homelessness services put **the psychological and emotional needs of homeless and vulnerable people at the centre of all support work.** The ethos requires a transformation in staff attitudes and approach, it is person centred and as open ended as possible.
 9. Currently a lot of the funding for homeless organisations is very short term and predominantly for new approaches. It is **important for funding to be long term** and fund what genuinely works.

Messages to Government from participants:

Increase the supply of genuinely affordable housing	11
Adopt a clearer long term strategy to address the root causes of homelessness and use a person centred approach	9
Establish more long term funding for local authorities to prevent homelessness	8
Introduce regulation of the private rented sector	6
Increase the Local Housing Allowance	5
Encourage local authorities and other organisations to work together and share learning	5
Change how Universal Credit works	3
Stop cuts to spending	3
Focus on the cost savings for other services tackling homelessness would bring	2
Encourage Housing Associations to do more to tackle homelessness	2

Case Studies

Psychology in Hostels

One project which has adopted a PIE approach is the Psychology in Hostels project. The project funds psychologists to work full-time in hostels. They provide training for staff on the PIE approach. It is important to understand people's life stories so staff can understand how different scenarios will impact them. By having psychologists on site full time it allows for informal contact which can build up to formal sessions once people feel comfortable.

Mayday Trust

The Mayday Trust wanted to address what was wrong with the way the sector works to tackle homelessness. They spoke to people about what they thought about the current system. People said it was "embarrassing and dehumanising". People are more than just their problems. For example sending someone to rehab for alcohol abuse just reinforces the sense of failure. People become segregated from mainstream society, the only people they come into contact with are staff and other homeless people. Mayday Trust want to become an "influencer for systems change" to address these issues.

The Mayday Trust suggest that there are 3 problems in the homelessness sector:

1. Focussing on a person's weaknesses means they can only progress so far
2. The art of 'fixing': people are more than a sum of their problems.
3. Segregation: The only other people homeless people see are other homeless people in survival mode or paid professionals.

Spear

Spear provide hostels and emergency accommodation for rough sleepers. They aim to build trust between their staff and the people they are helping so they can help them in the best way. The recovery hostel has a high level of well trained staff which is expensive but very important. They also provide pathway services working on tenancy sustainment and specialist health services. They have 32 training flats rented from a Housing Association which encourage independent living. They also rent 90 HMO properties from private landlords. Their tenancy sustainment team works closely with the people in the properties, they have a 95% tenancy sustainment rate.

Commonweal

Commonweal are an action learning charity who facilitate new housing projects, they work with delivery partners to come up with innovative solutions to tackling homelessness. They evaluate each project and share the learning. Some examples include:

- The Peer Landlord Project is a partnership between Thames Reach and Catch 22. They realised people were stuck in hostels who didn't need to be because of a lack of move on accommodation. They provide shared accommodation which one person takes the responsibility to manage. The project is predominantly for low needs clients.
- In East London there is a high rate of migrants with no recourse to public funds. The scheme places families from hostels into more suitable accommodation which frees up space for single homeless people. They then support the family from the home.

Hightown Housing Association

Hightown Housing Association was set up after the release of Cathy Come Home, it does lots of work to try and help tackle homelessness. They support around 180 statutory homeless people a year. They run a women's refuge and have 850 supported housing units housing women, asylum seekers

and people with additional needs. They are setting up a project for people with no recourse to public funds. It will allow them to live rent free for 3 months and then slowly pay back the rent over time once they have a job.

Spires Centre

The Spires Centre works with vulnerable and homeless people. One project works with vulnerable women working as street based sex workers. They are normally homeless or insecurely housed. They have an outreach car that goes out 3 nights a week and 1 morning. It takes time to slowly build up a relationship with the women, often they talk to the women for 2 years before they will engage with services.

Solace Womens Aid

Solace works to tackle violence against women and girls. They provide emergency refuge accommodation, alongside follow on support. They find that 6 months is the optimum time to stay in refuge accommodation and after this time it can become damaging. The Rhea project is a partnership between Solace, Commonweal and Southwark Council. It provides supported self-contained temporary accommodation for women and children escaping violence. Solace are currently working with other organisations to try and offer a greater variety of accommodation options, for example at the moment, if a women has a son over the age of 14 they are not allowed to stay together.

Homes for Cathy

Homes for Cathy is a group of Housing Associations who want to highlight the important role Housing Associations can play in tackling homelessness. They have 9 key commitments:

1. To contribute to the development and execution of LA homelessness strategies
2. To operate flexible allocations and eligibility policies which allow individual applicants' unique set of circumstances and housing history to be considered
3. To offer constructive solutions to applicants who aren't deemed eligible for an offer of a home
4. To not make any tenant seeking to prevent their homelessness, homeless
5. To commit to meeting the needs of vulnerable tenant groups
6. To work in partnership to provide a range of affordable housing options which meet the needs of all homeless people in their local communities
7. To ensure that properties offered to homeless people should be ready to move into
8. To contribute to ending migrant homelessness in the areas housing associations operate
9. To lobby, challenge and inspire others to support ending homelessness.