

A Review of Single Homelessness in the UK 2000 - 2010

Anwen Jones and Nicholas Pleace

Summary, December 2010

Background

This review was commissioned by Crisis and conducted by Anwen Jones and Nicholas Pleace at the Centre for Housing Policy at the University of York. The aim of the review was to provide an overview of single homelessness in the UK in the last decade including changes and continuities in single homelessness; policy changes and developments in responses to single homelessness.

The last decade has seen a number of important developments in homelessness policy in the UK, not least the divergence in homelessness policy in the four nations of the UK following devolution in 1998. These developments have included important changes to the homeless legislation in all parts of the UK; an increased emphasis on homelessness prevention; new strategies to tackle rough sleeping; the Supporting People programme; developments in health provision; and, an increasing emphasis on supporting single homeless people into employment.

The focus of the review is the decade 2000-2010 which was, for the most part, a time of relatively plentiful resources and positive developments in single homelessness. The context in which the review is published is a very different one. Major public sector spending cuts and radical welfare reforms have been announced and there are to be major changes to the way local government operates.

Review findings

- There is evidence that the single homeless population continues to grow more diverse. The proportion of men is falling, there is an over-representation of people with Black ethnic origins, and there is evidence of homelessness among recent migrants, particularly economic migrants from central and eastern European countries. There is limited evidence from England that although homelessness acceptances have fallen very sharply, some forms of single homelessness have not decreased and might even be increasing.
- Considerable progress has been made in our understanding of the causation and nature of single homelessness, both in the UK and internationally. The causes of single homelessness are complex, they are individual and relate to actions and decisions as well as to support needs, characteristics and experiences but they are also related to structural factors and the range and level of welfare and housing support available.
- Homelessness policies have developed in different ways in each of the four nations of the UK but all have introduced significant changes to the homelessness legislation. The extension of priority need categories to include groups at particular risk of homelessness, such as young people, has been a positive development. However, many single homeless people still have to be deemed vulnerable in order to be considered in priority need under the legislation. In Scotland, priority need is to be phased out by 2012. Whilst the principle of this legislative change is welcomed, there remain significant challenges in meeting the 2012 target in the absence of sufficient appropriate accommodation.

- There have been a number of other positive developments including:
 - 1 *local homelessness strategies* – which encouraged local authorities to recognise the problem of single homelessness and to adopt a more strategic approach to tackling it;
 - 2 *the Supporting People programme* – this encouraged strategic working and the development of new and improved interventions and services. The removal of ring-fenced Supporting People grants might result in funds being diverted away from single homeless people;
 - 3 *the Hostels Capital Improvement Programme and Places of Change* – these programmes were seen to have achieved significant improvements in hostel provision and outcomes for service users, however there is a lack of robust evidence on these programmes; and
 - 4 *rough sleeping policies* - governments in England, Scotland, and Wales continued to give rough sleeping a high priority and new interventions have been developed to tackle the needs of the most entrenched and marginalized rough sleepers. Although significant progress has been made in tackling rough sleeping, it remains a problem in parts of the UK and it appears to be a growing problem in Northern Ireland.
- One of the most significant policy changes in the last decade has been the increased focus on the prevention of homelessness. Whilst this development has been welcomed, there are a number of concerns about how the policy operates in practice.
- Preventative efforts are sometimes focused on those who are likely to be statutorily homeless rather than on single homeless people and in some cases, local authority officers appear to be more concerned with reducing the number of homelessness acceptances than actually preventing homelessness. There is a need for improved practice in monitoring and evaluation of preventative interventions.
- Whilst homelessness prevention interventions have been broadly welcomed, international research suggests that an affordable housing supply and adequate wages and/or welfare benefits may be more effective in preventing homelessness.
- There have also been improvements in housing support for single homeless people. Earlier trends to replace old, large, hostels have continued. New services offer a mixture of smaller more supportive forms of housing and resettlement and tenancy sustainment services to formerly and potentially homeless single people in ordinary housing.
- The longstanding problem of insufficient affordable, suitable move on housing continues to create operational difficulties. Many single homeless people continue to remain in hostels or other forms of short-term accommodation for far longer than necessary.
- There is evidence to suggest that the success of housing support services for single homeless people can vary. However, better data on service outcomes are required to determine the effectiveness of housing support services and the relative effectiveness of different types of interventions. In particular more evidence is needed on longer term outcomes.
- Single homeless people continue to experience worse health than the general population. Research has consistently shown that homelessness can have detrimental effects on both physical and mental health and well being. There is also evidence that the life expectancy of single homeless people may be significantly less than people who have never experienced homelessness.

- Debates continue over whether single homeless people require specialist health services because of the barriers they face when trying to access mainstream NHS services. Whilst some single homeless people may be able to access mainstream services independently or with some support, those with very high support needs (such as severe mental health problems, substance misuse, and poor physical health) might require specialist health services. Such services are expensive but it is possible that they can produce savings over the long term.
- There have been improvements in service coordination and joint working in health but problems remain nevertheless. In particular, services are still reluctant to accept responsibility for single homeless people with both mental health and substance misuse problems.
- International research evidence suggests that housing support services that help coordinate access to healthcare and/or case manage health services as part of a package of support and care can be effective. The homelessness sector has increasingly recognised the importance of education, training and employment for homeless people and there has been a real growth in services over the last decade, particularly linked to wider 'welfare to work' agendas.
- The provision of education, training and employment services for single homelessness people, by a range of Third Sector agencies, has continued to grow.
- Some single homeless people continue to face significant barriers to securing employment. These can include low educational attainment, little or no work experience, benefit and poverty traps, discrimination by some employers, and, health problems.
- Whilst many single homeless people may be able to find employment with some support, others will find it more difficult, particularly at a time of high unemployment. It is important for services and funding agencies to be realistic about what education, training and employment services can achieve.
- Although there is some evidence to suggest that participation in education, training and employment programmes can have positive outcomes there is no robust research that demonstrates the effectiveness of these services for single homeless people over time.

Conclusions

- The review found that a good deal of progress had been made over the last decade in tackling single homelessness amongst some groups, particularly young people and people sleeping rough. However, single homelessness remains a significant problem and many of the issues identified in earlier research – such as a lack of appropriate and affordable accommodation, the poor health status of single homeless people, and barriers to employment – persist.
 - The election of the Coalition Government presents significant challenges for the homelessness sector. There are a number of strategic changes which look set to have important implications for services for single homeless people and strategic responses towards single homelessness, including: the localism agenda, the Big Society, welfare reform, a new work programme, and housing reform.
 - Localism and the Big Society create considerable potential for flexibility in service provision, which might lead to important innovations and opportunities for the Third Sector. However, there may also be the freedom for a local authority to opt to do very little in response to single homelessness. This is a particular concern at time when funding is scarce and there are competing demands for resources from other groups.
 - Changes to Housing Benefit and Local Housing Allowance could place many thousands of households in great financial difficulty, which could result in rent arrears and the likelihood of eviction, and/or in people being left with insufficient income to live on.
 - The Government has also announced a new system of conditionality backed up by tougher sanctions – including withdrawal of benefits – for those who do not comply.
- It is likely that single homeless people with ongoing support needs may find themselves subject to sanctions, including withdrawal of benefit.
- The new Work Programme is yet to be rolled out nationally and it remains to be seen how it will operate in practice. Whilst the programme offers the potential for more personalised, flexible support there are some concerns that smaller voluntary providers may lose out under new contracting arrangements and that service providers, who are to be paid by results, may ‘cherry-pick’ those clients who are closer to the labour market. This could have serious implications for those single homeless people who require more intensive support.
 - Planned housing reforms are also radical; the Comprehensive Spending Review saw the housing budget cut from £8.4bn over the previous three year period to £4.4bn over the next four years. New social housing tenants will have to pay higher rents and there are also plans to introduce fixed term contracts for new social tenants.

Recommendations

- It is recommended that the requirement to provide meaningful assistance should be rigorously enforced regardless of whether or not someone is deemed in priority need.
- There remains a need for an adequate supply of affordable accommodation if the long term housing needs of single homeless people are to be addressed.
- There also remains a need to ensure there are adequate and appropriate support services for single homeless people and to build on the achievements and progress made over recent years in further developing preventative interventions (such as generic and specialist tenancy sustainment).
- More emphasis should be placed on identifying all groups and individuals at risk of homelessness at an earlier stage and on the development of effective early prevention interventions for those at risk of becoming homeless.
- Local authorities and other services working with single homeless people must ensure that private rented sector accommodation is of a decent standard and that adequate support is available for vulnerable tenants.
- High quality specialist health services should continue to be supported. At the same time more needs to be done to address the discrimination and prejudice that many single homeless people face when trying to access mainstream health services. There is also a clear need for more adequate support for those with dual diagnosis.
- Education, training and employment (ETE) services that target single homeless people can be effective and these specialist services should be retained as welfare to work support is reformed. There needs, however, to be an increased focus on evidencing the success of ETE services for single homeless people.
- The Government should continue to draw on the expertise and experience of Third Sector agencies in developing responses to homelessness.
- The Third Sector must continue its efforts to demonstrate both the continued need for its services and its expertise in providing effective services for single homeless people.
- The Government has to recognise that while small-scale voluntary organisations have an important role in delivering services, they will require sufficient and (relatively) secure funding streams if they are to be able to deliver services of a high standard.
- The Government must ensure adequate funding for Third Sector services if the positive achievements made over the past decade are to be sustained and developed.
- Central Government must ensure that the devolution of power and autonomy to local authorities under their localism agenda does not result in the needs of vulnerable single homeless people being neglected.
- Lessons should be drawn from the experiences of the London Delivery Board in supporting the most entrenched rough sleepers.

- Services must be encouraged and enabled to develop effective responses to the needs of changing client groups whether or not these groups have recourse to public funds.
- There is a need to strengthen the evidence base in order to improve knowledge about the nature and extent of single homelessness and to further develop cost effective responses to the problem.
- Finally, there is now considerable divergence between the different nations of the UK in their responses to single homelessness, in England, with the advent of the localism agenda, a similar divergence may become evident at local authority level, and there are good opportunities for learning from comparative research in this new context.

About this project

The report was written by Anwen Jones and Nicholas Pleace from the Centre for Housing Policy at the University of York. The research involved a comprehensive literature review and in-depth and focus groups interviews with key stakeholders from across the UK, including policy makers, service providers, homelessness specialists and single homeless people.

For more information

The full report, *A Review of Single Homelessness in the UK 2000 - 2010*, by Anwen Jones and Nicholas Pleace, is published by Crisis. It is available as a free download from www.crisis.org.uk.

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Get in touch

Crisis

66 Commercial Street
London E1 6LT
Tel: 0844 251 0111
Fax: 0844 251 0110

www.crisis.org.uk

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