

**EUROCITIES Peer Review
of Newcastle City Council's
Services to Homeless People**





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1. INTRODUCTION

This review is based on the following sources:

- Academic literature;
- Written reports provided by key staff working in the area of homelessness and homelessness prevention;
- Five interviews with key staff; and
- The visit by the EUROCIITIES group on 21-22 September 2010 which involved presentations by staff, visits to projects for homeless people and discussion among the peer group members. The group members represented the cities of Barcelona, Malmo, Munich, Oslo, Rotterdam, Stockholm and Vienna.

2. NATIONAL LEGISLATION AND POLICY

The work with homeless people in Newcastle is affected by the national legislative and policy framework. Key developments in this area were:

- The 1977 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act, which was amended by the 1996 Housing Act and placed responsibility for accommodating or advising homeless people on housing departments;
- The 2002 Homelessness Act which sought to balance the housing focus by requiring local authorities to work strategically and in partnership with other agencies to prevent and tackle homelessness;
- The introduction of the Supporting People programme in 2003. Money which had previously been paid by central government in the form of housing benefits to meet the costs of accommodating homeless people was transferred to local authorities. This enabled authorities to commission housing and support services in line with their strategic aims;
- Guidance issued by the government in 2007 which placed an expectation on local authorities to 'address the wider causes of housing need' rather than to concentrate on intervening in a crisis. In 2008-2009, local authorities in England reported 130,000 cases of homelessness prevention or relief taking place outside the statutory homelessness framework (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2009). Nationally and internationally, appropriate prevention policies have been identified as likely causes of reduced homelessness (Busch-Geertsema and Fitzpatrick, 2008).

3. CONTEXT

Newcastle upon Tyne is the regional capital of the North East of England. It has a below average level of employment and a high level of deprivation in outlying areas. Although the majority of the housing stock is owner occupied, it is above the national average for the percentage of both social rented housing and private rented housing. The local authority owns 30,000 homes, which are managed at arm's length by Your Homes Newcastle (YHN). The private rented market has grown rapidly in recent years as the number of students in the city has increased. NGOs provide over 600 bedspaces of emergency and non-emergency accommodation.

Newcastle City Council has historically been seen as a progressive local authority in relation to homelessness, particularly in its work with young homeless people (Venn, 1985; Harding, 2004).

4. SERVICES PROVIDED TO HOMELESS PEOPLE BY NEWCASTLE CITY COUNCIL

Overview

The Housing and Welfare Rights service of Newcastle City Council has three main aims:

- To reduce the demand for crisis services;
- To improve the quality of the supply of services; and
- To lead and coordinate housing, care and support services.

It operates on three levels:

- Primary prevention activities for all the community;
- Secondary prevention activities for people at risk of homelessness; and
- Crisis prevention activities for people at imminent risk of losing their home or their income.

The service has enjoyed a high level of political support and has benefited in recent years from additional funding, a strong partnership with YHN and changing attitudes from NGOs, who have accepted that their role should alter from increasing supply to reducing demand.

As required by the 2002 Homelessness Act, the city council has produced a homelessness strategy for 2008-2013 which identifies the following objectives:

- Wherever possible preventing homelessness;

- Continuing to create options and solutions to meet housing needs;
- Humanely and effectively supporting people who become homeless;
- Proactively seeking to help the most excluded people who sleep rough;
- Meeting not just people's accommodation needs but also their health, support, care and employment needs; working together to address the causes of homelessness and create opportunities for change; and
- Developing high quality buildings that create hope and inspire change.

The last of these objectives has been addressed as NGOs in the city have accessed funding through the government's Places for Change programme to substantially improve the accommodation that they provide. The local authority is in the process of building new temporary accommodation to replace its existing buildings at Hill Court.

Other developments to services that have sought to implement the objectives set out in the strategy are discussed below:

Services to Prevent Homelessness

The emphasis on prevention in the city council's homelessness strategy reflects the approach of the Department of Communities and Local Government, which has focused on the prevention of homelessness and crisis by addressing housing needs through enhancing housing options. Recent key service developments include:

- The creation of a homelessness prevention fund, which can assist with a wide variety of needs: for example providing transport costs to re-connect people to their area of origin;
- The local authority repossession prevention fund which can provide small grants or loans to households at risk of repossession or eviction;
- A landlords' incentive scheme which provides financial incentives to private landlords in order to secure long term tenancies;
- The mortgage rescue scheme which was created at a national level to assist families struggling with mortgage repayments;
- Partnership working with Newcastle Debt Advice and the YHN young people's service. The young people's service provides assessments and prevention services to 16-17 year olds from the Housing Advice Centre (where the homelessness section is based);
- The creation of a fast track referral system which ensures that anyone who is at risk of having their property repossessed meets a specialist advisor within three days;
- Working with the Northern Rock and Newcastle building societies to identify and support, at an early stage, those people who are having difficulty in paying their

mortgage. Similar work with other lenders has proved more difficult because they are restricted in the adoption of local policies; and

- The creation of a lead practitioner role for people with complex needs; a major part of the role is to improve the coordination of services for people leaving hospital, prison, the armed forces or the care system.

Rough Sleepers and Chronic Exclusion

Historically there has been a disparity between numbers of rough sleepers in Newcastle as counted by the police and the estimates provided by NGOs. Following guidance from the Department of Communities and Local Government, the disagreement was resolved by counts each weekday of the numbers sleeping rough, with the current level being approximately six. The city has adopted the government's target of ending rough sleeping as a habitual lifestyle by 2012. There are four key elements to the work with rough sleepers:

- Outreach - the national Adults Facing Chronic Exclusion (ACE) programme has funded the provision of outreach services by former rough sleepers under the management of the Cyrenians.
- Verification - assessment to distinguish between those in most severe need (e.g. rough sleeping) and those whose needs are less severe (e.g. staying with friends).
- Case management - a case management approach facilitates a better understanding of the needs of rough sleepers and an opportunity to plan access into housing and support.
- Commissioning and contracting - working with the commissioning team to ensure contract compliance has reduced the number of evictions from supported housing and increased the quality of support provided. There is now a protocol regarding eviction from temporary accommodation.

The authority acknowledges that a weakness in the work with rough sleepers is a difficulty in engaging with mental health providers, particularly when dealing with homeless people who have drug or alcohol addictions.

The Gateway

The Gateway for single homeless people was made possible as a result of improved relationships with NGOs. These improved relationships arose not just from the introduction of the Supporting People programme but also the work of Newcastle Homeless Liaison Project which ensured better co-ordination of the work of agencies in the homelessness sector. The Gateway was a response to the evidence that the most common previous address given by a homeless person was a homeless hostel and reflected the government's aim to ensure services were targeted at the most vulnerable groups to prevent homelessness and improve access to services.

The Gateway acts as a single register for people identified by commissioning partners as needing supported accommodation. Providers of supported housing use the Gateway to fill their vacancies and also provide information about discharges. Advantages of the Gateway are that clients only need to provide information to one agency, duplication is eliminated in efforts to find or to fill a vacancy, NGOs must justify the allocation of their places according to needs, data is accumulated on met and unmet need, and it is possible to track the progress of homeless people over an extended time period.

5. POSITIVE OUTCOMES

The city council has been able to identify a large number of positive outcomes that have occurred in parallel with the development of the services described above. These outcomes include:

- Generating high levels of income for residents;
- Eliminating the use of bed and breakfast hotels for homeless households (last used in December 2006);
- A large increase in the number of homelessness prevention interventions;
- A reduction in evictions from YHN property and supported housing;
- A large decrease in Mortgage Court Orders;
- A reduction in statutory homelessness cases;
- A substantial increase in the number of people moving on from supported housing to an independent tenancy.

6. EVALUATION

The evaluation of the peer review team was organised under six headings:

Aims and objectives

The review team noted that there was a good and consistent structure to the work with homeless people; aims and objectives were consistent with national legislation and policy, supported by the elected members and understood by the staff. The commitment of both members and staff was central to the development of effective services.

Two elements of the aims were particularly praised: the focus on prevention and the emphasis on motivating homeless people to be independent by equipping them with independent living skills. One suggestion for improvement by the review team was to more clearly articulate how individual interventions contributed to meeting the aims and objectives of the service as a whole.

Measurement

- The review team identified the daily counting of rough sleepers as an example of excellent practice. Wider questions were raised about the measurement of the effectiveness of services; it was noted that much evaluation was based on the avoidance of negative outcomes such as repeat homelessness or eviction from temporary accommodation. There was agreement that a longer-term evaluation of the impact of services was desirable, such an evaluation should focus on meeting both housing and non-housing needs.
- The review team also expressed a wish to see more user evaluations of Newcastle's services. While a user perspective is sought through two organisations - Youth Voice and Newcastle User and Carer Forum - more forms of consultation and measurement of the views of service users was felt to be desirable.
- In a difficult financial climate, it will be particularly important to demonstrate that providing effective services to homeless people can help to save longer-term costs. While attempts have been made in Newcastle and other cities to quantify the benefits of preventative services to homeless people, there is often a difficulty in showing a direct saving. For example, it is assumed that the Family Intervention Project funded by Your Homes Newcastle has saved money for children's care services but this saving is very difficult to quantify or demonstrate. This particular example raised a difficulty experienced by other members of the review team - the 'we spend, you save' difficulty - spending by one organisation, or one part of an organisation, may lead to savings elsewhere but this is not easily demonstrated or necessarily reciprocated. Given these difficulties with measurement, the direct savings on bed and breakfast hotels in Newcastle is a particularly important measure of success.

Partnership

- Newcastle's strategy in working in partnership was judged to have been a successful one, with the integration of debt and housing advice seen to be particularly effective. Members of the review team commented on one difficulty associated with partnership working: namely that the agreed strategy may have little impact on the service provided to the client. This concern reflects one expressed at many levels of policy; policies and procedures are not implemented in the manner that is expected by policy makers (Hill and Hupe, 2009, p.166-167). This may be partly a product of the freedom that professionals often have to interpret the requirements placed on them, which can lead them to process people in a standard and stereotyped manner (Hill, 2005, p.242-243).
- However, a number of factors contributed to ensuring that many of the aims of partnership working were put into practice in Newcastle. Commissioning through the Supporting People programme has had a positive impact on relationships between the local authority and NGOs, although there is still a need to provide evidence to demonstrate the appropriateness of the types of services that are being commissioned and to build goodwill. Making staff time available to take part in partnership working was seen as central to maintaining goodwill and ensuring that partnership strategies had an impact on the service provided to the client. This is particularly important because, as the review team noted, the benefits of networking are difficult to sustain over an extended period of time.
- Ensuring that NGOs work together is an area of common concern and one where commissioning has had a less substantial impact.

Working with homeless people and people threatened with homelessness

- There was a consensus that a case management approach is beneficial in working with homeless people. The professional background of the case manager is something that varies between cities and can also vary within Newcastle, where a different professional may become the case manager as the situation of the homeless person changes. Naturally, the professional background of the case manager has an impact of the skills that can be brought to work with the homeless person, but it was agreed that commitment may be the most important factor that is required of the manager. If the case manager is a specialist in the area of homelessness - as is often the case in Newcastle - this has the advantage of limiting the goals of the work undertaken. These goals can focus on the strategic planning of the movement through progressively more independent housing situations. In contrast, there were some concerns expressed during the review that a social work background may broaden too far the type of issues that must be addressed with the client. Of course, these considerations must be balanced against the desirability of seeing the full range of needs of the client.
- The review team praised the housing focus of the work with homeless people in Newcastle. They were particularly impressed that staff know the names of the

homeless people; this makes it much easier to share information and to solve problems.

- Some concerns were expressed over the provision of services to homeless people with the highest levels of anti-social behaviour, who are most difficult and expensive to support. While the eviction protocol was seen as a positive development, it was acknowledged by staff that there are still very difficult people who regularly move in and out of temporary accommodation. Staff commented on the difficulty of working with a funding regime that implies that one set of services is appropriate for all homeless people. They also suggested that the provision of accommodation is driven by the availability of bedspaces, meaning that the people with the greatest need do not necessarily receive the most intensive support, provided by the most qualified people. However, the reduction in the numbers of people who are rough sleeping provides an opportunity to concentrate services on a manageable number of the most excluded people. The creation of a chronic exclusion panel in Newcastle will provide a further test of whether policy commitment at senior level can translate into improved services for homeless people.

Transferability

- There was considerable variation in the extent to which people from different cities worked with the private rented sector - depending partly, of course, on the size of that sector. All agreed that there was a difficulty with regulating the quality of private accommodation: an issue that may become increasingly important in Newcastle as private landlords house more homeless people.
- The homelessness prevention fund was seen as a particularly positive development by the reviewers because it ensured that facilities for chronically excluded people were not used by people who had a simple housing problem.
- The review team acknowledged the high quality of accommodation in the temporary accommodation projects visited. It was agreed that there had to be a trade off between quality and quantity: clearly higher quality provision reduces the number of people who can be housed at any one time. Experience elsewhere also suggests that improving the quality of temporary accommodation can increase demand, as people who are hidden homeless are encouraged to express their need. However, it was agreed that high quality provision was likely to ultimately reduce demand because there would be less instances of repeat homelessness.
- Other areas where good practice was seen to be relatively easily transferable were distinguishing clearly between primary prevention, secondary prevention and crisis management, and taking a consistent approach: for example, in using the Gateway to ensure that the people in the greatest need are offered emergency accommodation.

The Future

- Reductions in the amount of benefit payable towards rent were identified as a threat to homeless people in a number of cities. The review team also saw the amount of finance available, and the control of that finance, as a possible threat to future services. Greater support into independence and the creation of transitional tenancies are developments which should further ease the path from homelessness to independent living.

7. SUMMARY

The overall view of the review team was clearly that high quality services are provided to homeless people in Newcastle. The review highlighted the clear pathway from:

- Policy commitment and direction on the part of national government:
 - ↳ To commitment on the part of local authority members (councillors);
 - ↳ To city wide strategies;
 - ↳ To action on the part of local authority staff and NGOs;
 - ↳ To services provided to homeless or potentially homeless people.

An example was:

- Recommendations from the Department of Communities and Local Government to focus on rough sleepers:
 - ↳ Leading to local authority members taking part in rough sleeper counts and committing the city to improving services;
 - ↳ Leading to a case management approach being developed;
 - ↳ Leading to a protocol being developed with NGOs over evictions from temporary accommodation;
 - ↳ Leading to more formerly rough sleepers staying in temporary accommodation when they might previously have been evicted.

Elements of services that were particularly praised by the peer group were the knowledge of the homeless population, the preventative services provided and the quality of temporary accommodation. Common concerns were expressed around the control of budgets in the future and the need to ensure that successes in partnership working are sustained. The areas where it was suggested that Newcastle should seek to develop its services further were user evaluations of services, longer term monitoring to identify positive outcomes and a greater focus on tackling the needs of chronically excluded people.

A major challenge for the city will be to maintain the current high quality services, and bring about further improvements, in a more difficult financial situation. The key to achieving this could be demonstrating more clearly the benefits and savings that arise from the provision of preventative services - an issue that was recognised as vital by peer group members. If cities are to protect and develop their strategic function, the strategy must be clearly articulated and the value of it clearly demonstrated.

8. REFERENCES

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