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Barriers and Contradictions in the Resettlement of Single Homeless People

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Research in one local authority area suggests that a number of social policy difficulties and contradictions need to be resolved if single homeless people are to be resettled effectively. In particular, there are competing pressures on social housing providers, who are expected to meet the needs of socially excluded individuals while also creating sustainable communities and operating in a cost efficient manner. The government needs to clarify that meeting housing need is a priority for social landlords, and provide adequate funding for long-term support, if single homeless people are to find appropriate permanent accommodation.

Introduction

On its election in 1997, New Labour announced that its social and economic policies would be based on the Third Way, an enigmatic term which has generated complex debates (Ellison and Pierson, 2003: 7). This has involved a range of policies that claim to have moved away from traditional dichotomies of state v market and instead to have focused on 'what works' whilst still attempting to address more traditional Labour concerns of poverty and disadvantage. There has been a focus on 'social exclusion', a term whose meaning is itself elastic (MacGegor, 2003: 56), on sustainable communities (ODPM, 2003), on modernising the public sector (Foord and Simic, 2001), on a performance and regulatory framework (Audit Commission, 2007), on the forging of new relationships with the private and voluntary sectors and citizens themselves (Guy Peters, 2003) and on rights and responsibilities of those citizens (Lewis, 2003).

This focus on evidence-based policies rather than ideology, and on outcomes rather than process, has resulted in the emergence of policy conflicts in a number of areas such as crime (Hoyle and Rose, 2001) and community care (Foord and Simic, 2001). Indeed Foord and Simic (2001: 175) argue that some of the stated aims of New Labour's social policies are themselves problematic, for example 'the notion of sustainable communities begs the question of who is included and who excluded in order to make this thing called "the community" sustainable'. The rights and responsibilities agenda also raises the question: if citizens are perceived to be failing in their responsibilities, what rights do they have? This question is particularly relevant for housing policy because, under the Housing Act 1996, homeless people who are deemed to be 'intentionally homeless' have only limited rights and applicants for local authority housing whose behaviour is deemed to be unacceptable may be excluded from consideration for tenancies (DCLG, 2006c, 2006d).

This discourse on current social policy has significance for the resettlement of single homeless people. The attempt to meet the disparate and conflicting demands of the government has resulted in dilemmas for housing and support agencies who may feel overwhelmed by the pace of change (Foord and Simic, 2001) and unable to respond to all the demands placed upon them. Mullins and Murie (2006: 294) suggest that homelessness and social exclusion constitute a major challenge for housing policy as the emphasis on antisocial behaviour may reinforce the tendency to stereotype and exclude certain groups. This is a risk for single homeless people because rough sleepers have previously been stereotyped as being feckless and morally weak, and having chosen a deviant lifestyle (Pleace, 2000). Furthermore, as Crane *et al.* (2006: 163) note, 'homelessness is a marginal interest for most housing providers and social service and health agencies'. Homeless people may lose out to what are perceived to be the greater priorities of community safety, sustainable communities and a market and business culture.

Despite these competing priorities, and as part of its effort to tackle social exclusion, the government has devoted extensive resources to tackling homelessness (see, for example, Homelessness Directorate, 2003; ODPM, 2005a). It can claim a number of successes, such as rough sleeping being reduced by two-thirds between 1999 and 2001 (Randall and Brown, 2002). Another key objective is 'to halve the number of households living in insecure temporary accommodation by 2010' (ODPM, 2005a). The importance of this objective is demonstrated by there now being only one national performance indicator on homelessness for local authorities, i.e. the number of households living in temporary accommodation (DCLG, 2008: 46). The government has made clear that moving residents to permanent housing must be a specific aim of the provision of temporary accommodation.

The key mechanism for facilitating the resettlement of homeless people is the Supporting People programme. This programme was launched in April 2003 and is now the main source of funding for housing related support (as opposed to domestic, personal or nursing care). It provides funding for all forms of supported housing, from 'floating support' of a few hours per week for a household living in a self-contained property, to projects such as hostels which are staffed on a 24/7 basis (Supporting People, 2006).

The importance of resettlement is demonstrated by one of the four overarching objectives of the Supporting People programme: 'a programme that delivers quality of life and promotes independence' (ODPM, 2004a: 1). This objective is to be achieved by support planning and through Supporting People funding arrangements which assume that people will be able to move on from short-term accommodation within two years (Supporting People, 2005). While once it might have been assumed that most of the permanent 'move on' accommodation would be provided by local authorities, successive governments have encouraged authorities to transfer the ownership and management of their housing stock to Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) or Arm's Length Management Organisations (ALMOs) (Mullins and Murie, 2006). RSLs, ALMOs and those local authorities that retain their stock are known collectively as social landlords.

The origins of this article lie in a piece of research commissioned by a local authority in the North of England. For ethical reasons, the identities of the local authority, projects and research participants have been concealed. The area was one in which there appeared to be an adequate supply of permanent housing – demonstrated in recent years by the demolition of some rented housing stock – in addition to a large number of temporary

accommodation projects providing differing levels of support for single homeless people. The research was commissioned in response to concerns that a number of residents were staying in temporary accommodation projects for longer than the government's two year target for resettlement. The local authority asked that the research focused on the circumstances of these residents and the reasons for their extended stays in temporary housing. Four projects were selected for further study on the grounds that current or former residents had lived there for more than two years. The accommodation and support provided by each project was as follows:

- Project A had a variety of accommodation: a direct access hostel, staffed properties, shared properties with visiting support and sole occupied tenancies.
- Project B was a direct access, staffed accommodation project with a number of lower support units for residents who were ready to become more independent.
- Project C was a direct access, staffed accommodation project and part of a large organisation that had lower support options.
- Project D provided dispersed accommodation with visiting support.

Interviews took place with managers from each of these projects. It was hoped that a small number of longstaying residents from each project would also be selected for interview by the researcher. However, in practice, the researcher had to depend on projects themselves to identify residents who had lived there for more than two years and who they believed would be willing to be interviewed. This limited the number of residents who took part in the research to five and also raised the possibility that participants had been selected in order to highlight issues that the projects were keen to raise. While this may have been true to some extent, fears about bias were tempered by the knowledge that the number of residents staying for more than two years was a small minority in all projects, so the potential for selection was limited. The five residents (all names are pseudonyms) interviewed were:

- Paul, a man in late middle age who had lived in his project for over twenty years.
- John, a young man who had first moved into supported accommodation in his late teens and had returned after periods living with his girlfriend and in prison.
- Colin, a young man who had worked away and had been unable to find housing on his return to the area.
- Robert, a young man who had lived in a hostel after his release from prison, before moving into his current project.
- Brian, a young man who had moved to the project from another form of temporary accommodation which he had lived in on his release from prison

A further perspective was provided by interviewing the keyworkers of four of these residents.

The role of temporary accommodation projects

The Supporting People framework requires a commitment from temporary accommodation providers to promote independence among residents. The projects involved in the study were meeting this requirement by providing a range of services from the formation of a support plan, through specialist support for offenders with mental health

problems to preparation for work. The managers were keen to emphasise that, although projects may have failed to focus on resettlement in the past, planning towards this goal was now central to their work with residents:

> They have their own aims and objectives set out in the support plan and as they are working towards that then they'll see that they are achieving and recognise when they are ready to move on . . . .

The government's policies on Supporting People and resettlement imply that, if projects take this pro-active approach, all residents will be able to move on within two years. Managers and keyworkers gave three reasons for rejecting this view. These reasons were complex needs and the institutionalisation that could occur prior to arriving at projects, the isolation that could be experienced on moving out of temporary accommodation and the unforgiving nature of social landlords, who were perceived as being unwilling to give formerly homeless people the number of chances that they might need to make a success of managing their own tenancy. These three difficulties are considered further below.

Complex needs and institutionalisation

The difficulty of resettling someone with complex needs was illustrated by Paul, who had mental health difficulties, a physical health problem, difficulty in managing money, a problem with alcohol and difficulty in mixing with people younger than himself. Paul said that he was 'not sure' whether he would ever be able to move on and his keyworker suggested that he would always need the high level of support provided by the project. Similarly, one manager supported their view that some residents could never be resettled into independent accommodation by discussing the wide range of needs that homeless people might have, including difficulties with families, education, mental health, rejection and addiction to alcohol and/or drugs.

When discussing institutionalisation prior to arriving at the project, one manager suggested that a background in local authority care might make it 'too daunting' for people to live on their own. Another argued that older people who had spent a long period of time in prison 'take the change a lot more reluctantly and it's a massive change for them to come out into a community after a lengthy sentence'.

These views are consistent with research that has demonstrated a high incidence of homelessness among people with an institutional background. The over-representation of care leavers among homeless people has been identified on several occasions (e.g. Hutson and Liddiard, 1994; St Mungo's, 2006), and the Scottish Homelessness Task Force (2001: paragraph 62) noted the greater risk of homelessness among people who had spent time in a variety of institutions.

Isolation in independent accommodation

Much of the support provided by the projects was consistent with the government's view that family breakdown is a cause of homelessness (SEU, 1998: 3). Although some residents could receive intensive support for a period of time and there were a range of specialist

services linked to the projects, most support was at a lower level, similar to that which might be adopted by the parent of an adult child. One manager described a worker's role in the following terms:

> she'll sort of chivvy each one of her clients along, she goes to the house and it's a case of what's the matter with you, why are you not at your training course, come on jump in the car I'll take you along. They get on really well. I think the value of that kind of assistance keeps them focussed.

Staff were keen to emphasise the benefits of such low level, informal support and the advantages of sharing accommodation with peers. This was in contrast to the often lonely experience of independent living:

> I think also that for some people it's really hard for them to be with a group of people and then suddenly move into their own accommodation just by themselves with no support, no company, they've left their group of friends behind and I think people find that really hard and I believe that's why people come back to hostel life.

Despite reservations expressed by some residents about sharing accommodation, a number agreed with this assessment that it would be lonely living in independent housing. John expressed fears that, 'If you've got no one to talk to, you'll crack up.' He had friends in the housing project, whereas in contrast, 'If you move on, you'd be stuck.'

Similar fears about isolation were identified in the study of Hennessy and Grant (2006: 341). In the current study, where projects were able to offer a variety of forms of accommodation, some residents seemed positive about the prospect of moving to housing that was slightly more independent. However, for other projects that could not offer such a gradual transition, continuing visiting support was the key method by which they could help to reduce fears about isolation in independent housing. Robert illustrated the security that continuing support could provide:

> Just knowing that they are there in case I need someone to talk to I've got problems with like letters or bills or something that I can't understand . . .

However, staff were concerned about the level of continuing support that could be provided, with one keyworker suggesting that full-time outreach workers were needed for this work to be effective. One manager expressed disappointment that, after some initial contact, their agency was not able to visit frequently enough to offer the type of intensive support that some ex-residents required. Trying to leave a project without the support of specialist workers was 'sometimes too big of a step'. The likelihood of more support being available to residents to tackle isolation in independent housing is a question that will be returned to below.

Fear of failure and social landlords

In expressing concerns about residents moving into independent housing, professional respondents were acutely aware of the consequences of an unsuccessful move:

> I think it's got to be a slow process towards independent living, there's no point in rushing into it otherwise some people will end up back were they started from and then it will be even harder to put the support in place and promote their independence.

Moving someone on too quickly was seen as:

> setting people up to fail and if you know that you're going to move someone into a tenancy that they're not going to manage and they're going to end up back at the beginning again.

These fears appeared to be linked to the knowledge that residents were moving into an unforgiving environment when seeking independent accommodation, despite this accommodation being almost exclusively sought from social landlords. The majority of the residents who had made applications for housing to the largest social landlord in the area had been excluded from the waiting list. The process had provided little understanding of why the exclusion had been imposed, or what action could be taken to ensure acceptance in the future. Robert suggested that the decision to exclude him had been arbitrary and based on inaccurate information:

> They said that I had offended within this area and it was within the last month or so when it happened and like they weren't happy enough to give us a house in case I caused any more havoc around here, which was a load of rubbish 'cause none of that happened.

One keyworker suggested that these negative experiences of applying for housing were commonplace and that inaccurate reasons were often given for an application being refused. Managers expressed concerns such as there being no accommodation available for people with a history of drug abuse or anti-social behaviour (even when this had occurred years previously) and people who had accrued rent arrears being excluded, despite taking action to reduce the arrears while in the project.

In order to understand this reluctance to re-house formerly homeless people from temporary accommodation projects, it is necessary to consider further the situation social landlords face. These housing providers are subject to a rigorous inspection and assessment regime (Audit Commission, 2007), which includes performance targets and standards for rent areas, void levels, property standards and antisocial behaviour. All of these may be adversely affected by tenants who are unable to successfully manage an independent tenancy.

In addition, RSLs have had to raise money on the private finance markets in order to purchase stock and fund new developments. Their lenders need to be convinced that asset values and income streams will be maintained and as a result they have had to focus on asset management and business planning (Kramer and van Welie, 2001; Gruis *et al.*, 2004). Tenancy failure will inevitably affect a landlord's financial position.

The 1996 Housing Act (Section 160 A (8)) gave social landlords powers to exclude people from their waiting lists on the grounds of unacceptable behaviour. Blanket exclusions of classes of people are no longer permitted, but the legislation does allow people who have previously been evicted, or have behaved in a manner that could have led to eviction if they had been a tenant at the time, to be excluded from consideration. An investigation by Inside Housing reported in May 2007 found that over 70,000 people were excluded in 32 local authorities (Inside Housing, 2007).

The main social landlord in the area of this research appeared to be taking advantage of the powers available to them to limit the risk of housing people who were perceived to present a financial risk and/or a risk of management problems. Residents of temporary accommodation projects were finding it extremely difficult to be offered a second – on in some cases even a first – chance in an independent tenancy. This was clearly one factor contributing to the fears of workers that a failure in independent housing could have severe consequences. One episode of tenancy failure could blight a resident's housing prospects for a long time.

Other research into the re-housing of people with support needs (DCLG, 2006b) has identified management difficulties such as new tenants taking longer to move in and suggested that: 'RSLs and local authorities will need to be sensitive to the needs of different groups and adjust their approach to voids accordingly' (DCLG, 2006b: 8). The current research provided no evidence of this more sensitive approach being taken.

Policy evaluation

Although the support needs of homeless households have been identified many times by previous research and acknowledged in government policies and good practice guidance (e.g. Randall, 1998; ODPM, 2003, DCLG, 2007a; Lomax and Netto, 2007), it is clearly still difficult for homeless people in temporary accommodation to access the help they need to enable them to move on to independent living. This research has identified key issues to be considered when devising or modifying Supporting People and other policies.

The first issue is the underlying assumption of the Supporting People programme that all residents of temporary accommodation projects are capable of moving on and that this can be achieved within two years. Although staff of projects welcomed the focus of Supporting People on resettlement, there was a clear consensus that this particular assumption was unrealistic; a view consistent with the finding of Rosengard *et al*. (2001: 1) that some homeless people have a permanent need for supported housing. This view was also consistent with the government's own guidance on providing housing and support, which states that 'The needs of some users are such that independent living will always require some support' (DCLG, 2007a: 6).

It is not clear why remaining in a project beyond two years should be viewed as problematic if residents are assessed as needing ongoing support and they are making a genuine choice. Some members of other groups, such as older people or people with learning disabilities, may receive lifetime support and it seems appropriate that some homeless people should be considered in the same manner.

The research suggested two factors that made resettlement more difficult, although not necessarily impossible, were complex needs and an institutional background prior to moving into a project. The government has acknowledged the difficulties faced by homeless people with institutional backgrounds (for example, Rough Sleepers Unit, 2001) and changed the homelessness legislation to give additional priority to those who had previously been in care, prison or the armed forces (SC Deb 1 July 2002, c4). However, this additional level of priority only entitles homeless applicants to an offer of accommodation and does not guarantee appropriate support to live in such accommodation. Guidance to local authorities advises them to consider support needs to prevent homelessness and ensure tenancy sustainment (DCLG, 2006c: 31). Many local authorities have introduced floating support services as a result, but such support is not guaranteed. Indeed

Chapter 17 of the guidance, which deals with the importance of the suitability of temporary accommodation secured, barely mentions the provision of support, despite discussing issues such as standards and affordability in detail (DCLG, 2006c: 133–143). For the change to the legislation to bring lasting benefits, there needs to be a *duty* for local authorities to ensure that appropriate support is available when needed to overcome the negative effects that can result from an institutional background. The government's own publications (e.g. DCLG, 2007a, Lomax and Netto, 2007) provide evidence of the desirability of this approach.

This research supported previous findings that single homeless people may have complex and overlapping needs (ODPM, 2005b) such as drug and alcohol problems, mental and physical illness. People with complex needs may find it difficult to access appropriate and integrated services specifically because they do not fit neatly into a single classification. Many health and social services are sharply delineated as 'mental health' services or 'drug' services, etc (Mind, 2007). Although services for those with a dual diagnosis of drug and mental health problems are improving (Mind, 2007), there is still a need for more holistic co-ordinated services (McNaughton, 2005).

An example of an approach, which has sought to meet complex needs, is the creation of Tenancy Sustainment Teams (TSTs) to provide resettlement and continuing support to former rough sleepers in London. A recently published evaluation of the teams found they were successful in sustaining tenancies due to their flexible method of providing practical and emotional support (Lomax and Netto, 2007).

For residents of temporary accommodation projects, the need for flexibility in service provision may be achieved through keyworkers, who appear to fill a variety of roles in addition to accessing other services. Some projects in this study were also able to offer flexibility in terms of the level of support provided, with some intensively staffed housing options and others requiring more independence. However, other projects were able to provide less interim steps than they wished to on the path to independent living. For these projects in particular, the provision of follow-up support to residents who had moved into their own property was essential to fill the gap left by separation from their peers and the easily available services of a support worker. Unfortunately, the extent to which they could provide such follow-up support was constrained by the resources available.

The level of resources has been a major difficulty since the onset of the Supporting People programme. The introduction of the programme should mean that local authorities can plan strategically to meet needs for services because all temporary supported accommodation projects are funded through the same mechanism and must meet its specific requirements. However, a report by the Audit Commission (2005: 2) found that, although services had improved, delivery was not consistent across the country and there '*needs to be a long-term commitment and a financial framework to underpin minimum standards*'. A major concern among providers of support services has been funding cuts (Weaver, 2004). There has been particular concern that services for less popular groups, such as homeless people for whom there is no statutory responsibility, may be at risk (Walters in Weaver, 2004).

In this context, it may seem unrealistic to advocate the provision of additional funding for follow-up support. However, the research suggested that a failure to provide continuing support could undo the positive work of accommodation projects, meaning that substantial amounts of public funding had been used for no benefit. In addition to meeting the needs of former residents, a clear commitment to funding continuing support

should encourage social landlords to make lettings to homeless people, as this will lessen the risk of tenancy failure, as demonstrated by the evaluation of TSTs (Lomax and Netto, 2007).

However, such a commitment on its own may not be sufficient to ensure an adequate supply of permanent accommodation for formerly homeless people. The research suggested that difficulties in persuading social landlords to make offers of permanent tenancies may be the greatest barrier to effective resettlement. In part this may be due to the transfer of housing. This has created a division between local authorities, which retain statutory responsibilities for housing services, and ALMOs/RSLs, which own the majority of the stock (DCLG, 2007b). RSLs provide a growing proportion of social housing as a result of stock transfer, the Right to Buy depleting local authority stock, and Government funding for new developments favouring RSLs.

RSLs are required to assist local authorities in the carrying out of their duties under the homelessness legislation (s. 213 of the 1996 Housing Act) by co-operating with them as far as is reasonable in the circumstances. The most obvious form of co-operation is the provision of accommodation. However, a National Audit Office report (2005) identified local authorities' concerns that some RSLs were reluctant to house homeless families and Ambrosi (2005) reported the view of a Supporting People inspector that some housing providers were operating covert exclusion policies. The pressures on RSLs to meet the demands of their private funders and the government's performance regime appears to provide an explanation for a reluctance to house more homeless households, especially those that are perceived to be at the highest risk of tenancy failure.

The government has published a guide to more effective co-operation between local authorities and RSLs in tackling homelessness (ODPM, 2004b), but the impact of this guidance must be questioned when the government appears to be pulling landlords in the opposite direction through its focus on housing providers' responsibilities to ensure sustainable communities (ODPM, 2003) and to participate in the Respect agenda (10 Downing Street, 2007). These developments demand that landlords focus on the needs of communities rather than those of individuals in the allocation of housing (Shelter, 2006).

The apparently contradictory signals being sent by the government make it unsurprising that social landlords may choose to take the 'safe' option and not re-house people who they perceive to be a threat to their financial position or to sustainable communities. Resettling homeless people into permanent accommodation requires a substantial commitment from all the parties involved: without careful planning, intervention and support, failure is to be expected when it involves changing an established way of life (Seal, 2005).

Even when there is commitment and planning from all parties, homeless people may need more than one chance before they can manage an independent tenancy successfully. In their study of the closure of Alvaston resettlement unit, Deacon *et al.* (1995: 350) identify a willingness to give a 'second, third and fourth chance' as a key strength of the unit.

This contrasts sharply with the inflexible and unforgiving response of landlords reported by residents and project staff in this research. If homeless people were given the opportunity to make mistakes and sometimes to fail in their tenancies, there would be less fear that the progress made in temporary accommodation could be undermined by an unhappy experience of independent living.

Two practical changes would provide some encouragement to social landlords to provide a more flexible and supportive approach. The first would be to introduce trial

tenancies (a trial for the tenant rather than the landlord) and allow new tenants to leave after a short period without penalty. Dual funding for a limited period would be required to enable a trial to take place. The second would be to change performance indicators for social housing landlords to include the number of rough sleepers/single homeless people re-housed. This would ensure that those who housed people with a higher risk of tenancy failure were not penalised but rewarded.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the research suggested that the government's drive to resettle single homeless people may not be producing the desired results due to inflexibility over length of stays in temporary accommodation and a failure to adequately fund follow-up support. However, a more fundamental difficulty appears to be the contradictions in social policies, which mean that social landlords face pressures to be cost effective and to prioritise the needs of the community, while also being expected to re-house homeless people who are perceived to present risks in terms of rent payments and tenancy management. To deal with this contradiction, the government must re-state that the primary purpose of social landlords is to meet housing need and that pursuing other social policy goals does not justify the failure to achieve this purpose. It must support this statement through a regulatory regime that makes re-housing the most disadvantaged people a high priority and by ensuring that landlords are not financially disadvantaged by offering tenancies to people who may not be able to sustain them or who require more intensive management and support to ensure successful long-term resettlement. The cost of the failure to give such a clear direction to policy is likely to be a continuation of the high levels of difficulty experienced by single homeless people in making the transition to independent living.

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