

Crisis (2018)

Everybody In: How to End Homelessness in Great Britain

https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/238960/everybody_in_how_to_end_homelessness_in_great_britain_2018_es.pdf

There is always a danger that we make the aim of ending homelessness more complex than it needs to be. Essentially, people become homeless because of failings in public policy. Homelessness is the label under which people failed by migration and asylum policies, social welfare policies, domestic abuse strategies, housing policies, care for young people at risk, mental health etc. all come together.

It is partly because homelessness arises from failures in such a broad range of policies that solutions seem complex. It also makes it more convenient to address homelessness by focussing on 'fixing' the individual affected by homelessness rather than the systems that brought about the homelessness. Any plan to end homelessness needs to identify policy changes required as well as enabling a person centred solution for each individual.

'How to End Homelessness in Great Britain' is a daunting tome. A huge effort has been put into bringing together in one volume the state of knowledge about homelessness in three of the four parts of the United Kingdom. Given the size and scope of the document, it is surprising that the experience of Northern Ireland (legislation, statistics, strategies and recommendations for action) is not included. Northern Ireland has some unique characteristics (including managing a sectarian element in its history which has affected homelessness and housing policy, a Northern Ireland Housing Executive which was able to manage housing across the province and homelessness strategies which were different to the other three parts of the UK).

Despite that surprising omission, the document brings together a large amount of information on what is known about housing and homelessness in Great Britain. It does that very well. Although much of the document is a drawing together in one place what is already known, it also includes some interesting cost benefit analysis over 10 years of implementing its recommendations. Without wanting to spoil the

impact of this, unsurprisingly, it shows that there is a net financial benefit to tackling homelessness effectively. That is new work and a useful tool to assist in making the case for investment in long term solutions for homelessness.

The report describes itself as a 'plan.' In that respect, it is less successful. It makes a series of recommendations for both the UK government and devolved governments but without converting them into a plan. There are a series of recommendations for the UK and devolved governments mainly comprising a list of proposed legislative changes, but without clearly linking them to a plan. The changes would all be beneficial in tackling homelessness more effectively, but there is no analysis of whether they all need to be implemented simultaneously, or the impact of implementing some of them, but not others, or indeed the impact of implementing a change in one part of Britain on the other parts. For example, would abolishing 'local connection' rules in one part of the UK simply shift the issue to other parts?

This is not to underestimate the value of this wide ranging report, which is extremely useful as it stands. In its next iteration, however, it would be helpful to transform the series of valuable recommendations into a clear plan for implementation which recognises and addresses the potential pitfalls during the transition from where the three parts of the UK are now to where they should be at the end of the plan.

Whilst it is clear that there was very significant consultation from a range of relevant agencies, including people with experience of homelessness, in developing the report, which enriches its recommendations, there are very few recommendations aimed at agencies other than government.

Having been involved in developing the Scottish homelessness strategy in the early 2000s, our view was that government at local level could be the engine of change far quicker and more effectively than simply national government (though legislation was needed to reinforce the necessary changes). There are very few recommendations aimed at either local government or indeed the NGO sector. There is a welcome recognition in the report that it is not a static document but will need to develop. It would be valuable to develop a strategy for action amongst NGOs and local authorities as well as central government as the plan moves to maturity.

I spoke recently with a senior housing official in a Scottish local authority about the report who said he had a copy of it in his office but was less forthcoming when asked if he had either read it or used it. That is one of the issues with the report. It is extremely worthy, very comprehensive but not very user friendly. Nor is it clear who, other than civil servants in government departments, is expected to use it.

Homelessness charities are caught in the dilemma of having to prove they are needed and bidding for funds against the declared aim of most of them to be unnecessary in the medium or long term. The report raises the dilemma of charities

whose fundraising strategies often reinforce negative and counterproductive stereotypes of their beneficiaries in order to maximise funds. The report's authors make a welcome commitment to changing their own narrative to address this and urge others to follow suit. Very commendable, but there is no plan in the document aimed at the NGO sector to make this fundamental change.

The report identifies a need to change hearts and minds of the general public and to develop a more coherent and sophisticated understanding of the importance of homelessness prevention, the range of circumstances which constitute homelessness and sustainable solutions. Whilst undoubtedly that would be helpful in general terms, it is unclear what role that would have to play in a plan which is essentially about changing legislation. Ensuring those who need to be influenced have a good understanding to implement good legislative change is essential. Ensuring the general public have a better understanding of homelessness is not essential for implementation of that part of the plan (though a useful aim).

One question in my mind when I read this comprehensive but fairly lengthy report was to what extent it is a pitch for continued funding and to what extent it meets the declared aim of seeking to end homelessness. It is a legitimate role for any NGO to seek to make a pitch for new projects and future funding.

It does a bit of both. It sets out a clear path for the authors to seek funding for projects. Critical Time Intervention is mentioned very frequently as a means of addressing homelessness for certain groups in certain circumstances. It is, of course, a useful approach to explore further but the number of times it appears in the narrative and recommendations may overstate its potential contribution. It sits half way between an objective proposal for development and a pitch for funding for projects.

The danger in producing such a comprehensive report is that reviewers will always be able to find something that is missing. I hope that in its next iteration it might explore in its recommendations relating to private renting, a means of dealing with short term letting (such as Air B&B) which has grown dramatically in many tourist related towns and cities across the world and whose unrestricted growth has led to a reduction in private rented housing available for permanent housing.

There are elements in the report that are not helpful. It uses a new definition of homelessness splitting it into 'core' and 'wider' homelessness. It seems to complicate the issue unnecessarily when the ETHOS definition is already widely used and easily understood.

Other elements would benefit from further development as the document develops into a plan. It would be helpful to include a gendered analysis of homelessness and solutions. A more nuanced approach to the balance between the benefits of data

linkage and the implications for the privacy and civil liberties of homeless people needs to be developed. A less blatant approach to seeking funding for particular organisations. (It suggests in several places that a particular organisation be funded to undertake some work).

It would be really useful if work could be developed to tackle the problem identified in the report that investment by one department (e.g. housing) can lead to substantial savings in another area (e.g. health or criminal justice), yet the benefits are simply absorbed by health or criminal justice and not reinvested in the prevention of homelessness.

The amount of work and the number of people involved in developing this report should not be underestimated. It is a very useful bringing together of the state of knowledge about homelessness in Britain. I look forward to the next version which should translate the recommendations, statistics, projections and understanding into a workable and useable plan.

Robert Aldridge