



FEANTSA

FEANTSA Questionnaire Networking and Co-operation in the fight against homelessness

UNITED KINGDOM

Introduction

The situation in the UK is that as a result of devolution of power to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland there are differences in the way homelessness is being tackled in the different devolved areas. Some of the legislation is different and the framework for action against homelessness has developed in different ways. However, against that backdrop, there are also similarities - in the role of the voluntary sector, in most of the funding streams, in the way asylum seekers are treated and in the definition of homelessness which is used.

1a. The General Framework in which the fight against homelessness takes place in the UK

At the level of the United Kingdom the most significant ministries are the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Treasury. The DWP finances social security benefits, housing benefits and has transferred this year £1.8 billion to pay for housing support services through the new Supporting People funding regime, which is administered by local authorities. The Treasury undertakes a 'Comprehensive Spending Review' every three years, which determines the amount of public funding available to each of the devolved administrations as well as to English Ministries for areas of work such as housing, health and local government. Asylum seekers are all dealt with through the Home Office.

At the devolved level the situation becomes more complex. In England the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister manages a Homelessness Directorate. This evolved from the Rough Sleepers' Unit which was originally tasked with substantially reducing rough sleeping in England. It now has a broader remit aiming to join up the policies of relevant departments to co-ordinate action against homelessness.

In Scotland the Communities Minister has the main responsibility for homelessness. A Homelessness Monitoring Group comprising civil servants from the Homelessness Team, Housing Division, National Housing Agency and Health Department, a representative from the Health Boards, 2 voluntary sector representatives, two local authority representatives (one Councillor and one Director of Housing services), a representative from the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations and an academic monitors progress in implementing the new homelessness framework and reports annually to the Scottish Parliament.

The Minister of Health and Community Care [in Scotland] also has a role in ensuring that all Health Boards implement their Health and Homelessness Action Plans, and that health and social work services coordinate actions. This work is overseen by a

national Steering Group comprising representatives from the civil service (health department and homelessness team) local authorities, health boards and the voluntary sector. Housing Support services. In addition the Drug and Alcohol Action Teams which operate in each local authority area report directly to the Justice Minister.

In Wales, the National Assembly has adopted a Homelessness Strategy following a process which involved relevant members from both the statutory and voluntary sectors.

In Northern Ireland the situation has been more complex. The operation of the devolved assembly has been suspended on occasions for some considerable time. Therefore the responsibility for housing and homelessness has moved back and forward between the relevant UK Ministries via the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Assembly. The Housing Agency (the Northern Ireland Housing Executive) has produced a homelessness strategy for Northern Ireland, consulting widely with all relevant partners (though there is no statutory duty for them to do so). The relevant department in the Northern Ireland Assembly is the Department for Social Development which takes decisions following consultation.

At local level across Britain (though not in Northern Ireland) local authorities have the legal duty to house certain categories of homeless people (and to assess them). They also have a requirement to produce a local homelessness strategy to prevent and alleviate homelessness, bringing together all relevant partners at local level. In Northern Ireland the Housing Executive has this responsibility. However, services to homeless people are provided by a broad variety of agencies both statutory and voluntary.

1b How is the fight against homelessness funded?

Homelessness is such a complex area that there is no single funding source for tackling homelessness. Funding ranges from subsidy for house building in the social rented sector and rent subsidies to individuals through the housing benefit system to housing support services paid for through the new Supporting People funding regime.

Individual services may be funded in a variety of ways. If there is a health aspect it may be funded from the health service, if there is a social services aspect; funding may come from the local authority; some services may be funded by the national lottery (e.g. leaving home education in Scotland); some may be paid for through charitable trusts; some may be partly subsidised by the churches (though this is a small element of funding). There has been some specific central government funding for homelessness services (though not in Northern Ireland). Some organizations obtain funding from the corporate sector for sponsorship or partnership projects and some may have public fundraising initiatives, although for the smaller organizations this will only form a small part of their overall funding. The Rough Sleepers Initiatives in different parts of the UK were funded in different ways, but with special funds. There has also been some specific implementation money available in Scotland to assist local authorities with new duties under the new homelessness framework.

1c Co-operation between the voluntary and statutory sectors

Consultation and co-operation

Voluntary organisations are involved in both the development and execution of local homelessness strategies in a variety of ways. Some organizations have been commissioned by the local authority to research and write the strategy, others may have been involved in organizing user consultations on behalf of the local authority and others may have just responded to consultation events and papers. In some areas the partnership is far better than others, but the process is developing and improving across the country. (In Northern Ireland the voluntary sector was heavily involved in the development of the homelessness strategy and is consulted about major changes to policy). In all areas of the UK the voluntary sector plays a very large role in providing services to homeless people, either on its own or in partnership with other organisations. Government produces consultation papers on new policy initiatives which homelessness organizations can respond to directly, or more likely through their membership organization such as SCSH, ChiNI and Homeless Link. In some local areas and towns, there are homelessness forums, which bring together statutory and voluntary stakeholders to discuss current and future practice and policy issues in the local area and the statutory sector may well use this forum to consult on proposals or ideas.

There are a great many programmes delivered by the statutory sector in partnership with the voluntary sector and where the voluntary sector sit on strategic boards advising on future direction. These include Local Strategic Partnerships, Connexions, Crime and Disorder Partnerships, Learning and Skills Council.

Section 2

Co-operation and networking to ensure access to housing, based on co-operation between the 'homelessness sector' and the housing sector

a. housing associations

Housing associations play a very significant role in the provision of housing for people who have been homeless or who are at risk of becoming homeless. Housing Associations in some areas have a new role, where the social housing belonging to the local authority has been transferred to a housing association.

In Northern Ireland the situation is unique where all social housing is allocated according to the Common Selection Policy implemented by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. The central allocation policy means there is no local allocation of housing in local authority areas. This is partly to ensure the population is confident that there can be no discrimination on religious or other grounds.

In Scotland the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 placed a legal duty on housing associations to assist local authorities in implementing their homelessness duties. If a homeless person is referred to a housing association the association cannot refuse to house the homeless person unless it has 'good reason.' 'Good reason' is tightly defined in regulations (e.g. if the only accommodation available is located near the perpetrator of abuse against the homeless person). In the case of dispute an independent arbiter decides. Housing Associations were involved in formulating Scotland's homelessness

framework at national level and must be involved in the development of local homelessness strategies. Many run innovative support projects and most play a full role in helping to tackle homelessness.

In England, local authorities now have a duty to prepare community strategies that promote social, economic and environmental well-being. Local Strategic Partnerships and Community Safety Partnerships are the places where these strategies are developed. Local authorities and Housing Associations both have a key role to play in ensuring that housing features prominently in strategy formulation. The Supporting People programme is a catalyst for local authorities, housing association and other stakeholders such as the voluntary sector, to work together to formulate a strategy for vulnerable people in their area. The allocation of housing association property, especially where stock has been transferred is still through local authority nominations.

There has been some concern that homelessness issues are not considered sufficiently when councils seek to transfer their housing stock to housing associations. As a result the system can become confusing for homeless applicants, where the assessment for housing and allocation are conducted separately.

b. other issues

In Wales there is a full network of housing advice services operated by Shelter Cymru, a NGO, to ensure homeless people throughout Wales have access to independent professional advice.

There is very little networking with the private rented sector. Only in some areas in Britain does the private rented sector play a major formal role in housing homeless people. Although the private rented sector does provide accommodation for vulnerable people, it is very often without the support, and without guarantees of quality which are required to make the solution to an individual's homelessness sustainable.

There is a growing partnership culture across Britain where a housing provider (e.g. housing association) may provide the accommodation, but a voluntary organisation may provide support services. Separating support from accommodation can make life simpler for the homeless person. For example if they move accommodation their support may move with them, or if they do not relate to their support they can get a different support without losing their accommodation.

Local authorities (except in Northern Ireland) continue to have a duty to house unintentionally homeless people who are in priority need. They also have a duty to provide temporary accommodation and advice and assistance to other categories of homeless people. Co-operation between services is essential if, for example, we are to ensure that hostel places are not 'silted up' with homeless people unable to move on to more permanent accommodation.

The rights of homeless people are improving in all parts of the UK, but in different ways. In all areas the groups of homeless people who must be housed (by law) by a local authority are being extended to more high risk groups. The most progressive legislation is in Scotland where over a 10 year period the groups in priority need who must be housed will be extended in a phased manner until all homeless people are a priority. The planned target date for every homeless person to have a right to a house is 2012. So ensuring there is access to sufficient good quality housing is vitally important.

There is a new emphasis on preventing homelessness across the UK. This also requires good co-operation and networking. For example, housing providers should make debt advice available before a person is considered for eviction or other advice and assistance should be available to prevent a housing difficulty turning into the crisis of homelessness. There is also, for example, a need for co-operation between women's aid groups and local authorities to ensure women who have experienced domestic violence can move on from a refuge to accommodation which is safe for them.

2b Access to Health

The level of formal co-operation and networking varies considerably across the United Kingdom. Right across the UK in principle there is a right of every citizen to health care which is free of charge (paid for through taxation). Access to a general practitioner or to hospital treatment is free of charge. For those with chronic illness or who are below a certain income threshold prescribed drugs are also free of charge (for those above that limit there is a small charge of around 10 euros).

Homeless people may find it difficult to register with a general practitioner, although they have a right to be registered. It can also be extremely difficult in parts of the country to find a dentist who operates on the National Health Service, rather than in private practice.

The need to address the health needs of homeless people has been recognised in different ways in different parts of the UK.

In Scotland the Health Minister instructed every health authority to produce a health and homelessness action plan. All relevant interests including voluntary organisations, homeless people themselves and local authorities had to participate in developing the plan. Each plan had to be approved by the Minister. Progress on its implementation is monitored by a health and homelessness co-ordinator working in the Health Department, supported by a Steering Group which includes representation from NGOs, local authorities and health authorities as well as civil servants from housing and health departments. Each health authority is visited 6 months after the plan is implemented to check on progress (and annually after that). The Action Plans should be integrated with local authority homelessness strategies and also link to other health plans (such as mental health plans and equalities planning). They should also link with the work of Drug and Alcohol Action Teams. The essential elements towards its success have been the Ministerial backing for the project and the Co-ordinator (supported by the Steering Group) who have persistently followed up health authorities which were reluctant to produce good quality action plans.

In Northern Ireland the networking is usually more informal and ad hoc, linked to individual projects. There is some formal networking around primary and mental health services and some around drugs and alcohol, though this is mainly based in Belfast. In Northern Ireland there is a need for the networking to become more formalised and for the services to be regionalised.

In England the networking is also more informal and ad-hoc and linked to individual projects, This is the area that is probably the weakest of all the partnerships, with homelessness organizations finding it very difficult to engage with health strategically as well as access services for their clients, Homeless Link is involved in some work with the Royal College of General Practitioners to improve access to primary health to homeless people. There are a number of more formal networks locally around drug and alcohol and mental health, but linking with wider health or primary health is often difficult.

2c. Access to employment

Networking and co-operation in access to employment takes a number of forms. There has been a recognition that homeless people may be at different stages of employability, and that those with chaotic lifestyles will require a different response from those whose lives are more structured.

There are a number of initiatives across the UK where major employers in the private sector seek to give employment to homeless people, offering them additional support during their training.

There are other 'self-help' initiatives. For example in Edinburgh homeless people manage and staff a number of coffee stalls as a profitable business.

There are a number of accommodation projects which have an employment (or education and training) focus. The 'foyer' movement in the Britain gives its residents opportunities for employment or training as well as accommodation.

In Scotland one local authority has sought to be an exemplar by employing former homeless people in its housing department.

On a more formal level there are a number of initiatives. Jobcentre Plus operated by the Department of Work and Pensions offers vulnerable individuals a key worker and adviser who will assist them to gain the skills to enable them to move into work. For young people and single parents, the New Deal guarantees a job to people in those groups. If people are not yet ready for work the Gateway gives six months training to prepare for the New Deal.

In Scotland the New Futures Fund has operated in some areas offering funding to projects working with vulnerable people. 41% of service users have been homeless people, and most of the other people have drug or alcohol addictions. The NFF offers

basic skills to help people get structure back into their lives. There is no fixed timescale and progress is measured through soft indicators (e.g. increased self confidence, ability to work in a team, better family relationships). Evaluation has shown it to be extremely successful. Unfortunately there has been no decision to mainstream this initiative. The NFF uses government money directed by the national Enterprise Agency.

In England In recent years, some services have been set up specifically to help homeless people find employment or training. Many day centres and hostels provide advice and assistance to homeless people with finding employment, education and training. Since the 1990s, a number of Foyers have been set up for young people and provide accommodation, vocational guidance, assistance with training and job search, and links with local employers.

Government initiatives like New Deal aim to tackle unemployment by providing programmes for welfare benefits claimants.

Connexions is a new youth service which provides advice, guidance support and personal development services to all 13 to 19 year olds. Through the Connexions Partnerships, it brings together all the services that help young people and gives young people access to a Personal Advisor. They are replacing the careers service and are not just about training and employment, but this is part of their remit.

There are a variety of partnership projects between voluntary organizations and often with the statutory and private sectors to equip clients with life skills and other skills and training to move into employment. For example, the Ready for Jobs is an online job bank for people affected by homelessness. It gives 'job-ready' homeless individuals the opportunity to secure quality employment and employers the chance to address the homelessness issue by adding their job vacancies to the site. And another example would be Routeways who work with employers and a network of local employment organisations to provide different ways of accessing employment opportunities.

One of the major disincentives to work for homeless people living in hostels is that they get into a 'benefits trap.' Hostel fees are expensive and so if they move into work, virtually all their income would be spent on hostel fees. The issue of the benefits trap needs to be addressed. The new funding regime, Supporting People will assist with this by separating housing costs from housing support costs so that the resident only has to pay the rental costs.

2d. Co-operation and networking with the immigration sector

The asylum system in the UK is totally controlled by the Government, The only involvement of other sectors is for those who fall out of the system and are left with no money at all.

In the UK there is little contact between the homelessness sector and the asylum sector which has its own networks of advisers and support networks.

As far as refugees are concerned there is housing advice available to them once they have been given refugee status, but not while they are seeking asylum. In both Scotland and England there were multi agency forums set up to encourage the integration of refugees, one of the aims of which was to prevent homelessness. Unfortunately, the key issue, which is giving asylum seekers sufficient information and advice well in advance of becoming refugees to enable them to move smoothly into accommodation, has not been accepted by the government. Many refugees have to become homeless before they are housed, even if they have been in the country for many months waiting for a decision about their refugee status.

2e. Networking with the judicial system

There is growing co-operation and networking across the UK with the judicial system, although there remain some significant issues.

Prisons

In northern Ireland the Probation Board has promoted excellent formal links with the homelessness sector, and the prison system is producing a resettlement strategy which is designed to prevent homelessness among those leaving prison.

In Scotland, as part of the Rough Sleepers' Initiative, independent housing advice has been made available in every relevant prison. (There are some prisons from which you are transferred to another prison before release, and they do not have the advice). The advice is offered according to three different models which are currently being evaluated - two of which are provided by NGOs. The Scottish Homelessness Task Force recommended that Prisons themselves should take ownership of the need to provide housing advice, but so far this has not happened.

In England and Wales the National Probation Service for England and Wales (NPS) was established by the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act in April 2001 and comprises forty-two Probation Services (matching police force area boundaries) throughout England & Wales together with the National Probation Service based in London. There are links between local probation services and voluntary organizations as well as the provision of some services in prisons by voluntary organizations. There are important links in place between the Prison Service and other organisations, including the Employment Service and the National Probation Service, the further education sector and many voluntary bodies. A number of Government initiatives such as the Connexions Service, New Deal and the Prison Service Welfare to Work programme provide targeted support for prisoners and ex-offenders. All of these initiatives will help improve employability and the prospects of finding work and so reduce the risk of prisoners' re-offending.

Police

Police have been involved in joint training with local authorities and ngos in Scotland as part of the development of local homelessness strategies. The police are an integral part of homelessness strategies.

In England and Wales Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs) were established under the Crime and Disorder Act of 1998. The Act placed a new duty on local authorities and the police, in close co-operation with other agencies and local organizations, to formulate and implement crime reduction and prevention strategies. They must involve the police authority, the probations committee, the health committee, Parish Councils and Community Councils (Wales), NHS Trusts, governing bodies of schools and further education. Those invited to participate include the voluntary sector, housing associations, the LSC, the Crown Prosecution Service, as well as retailers, religious organizations and so on.

Drugs in hostels

There still remains an issue where drugs are used in a hostel, or where the project is running a harm reduction programme. Officially it is still illegal to permit drug use on the premises. Although some work is being done to try to address this, the position of workers in such projects is ambiguous and they might be subject to prosecution.

2f Other sectors

Young people who have been 'looked after' or have been in the care of a local authority are at a high risk of becoming homeless. New legislation removes them from the main benefits system, but offers them a key worker and a network of support to assist them to move towards independent living without becoming homeless.

Education about leaving home is an important preventative measure. Different ngos in different parts of the UK have developed lesson plans on leaving home for use in schools and youth settings. Schools and youth workers are therefore working with the homelessness sector to prevent youth homelessness. There is also a website: www.leavinghome.org

Section 3 Examples of Good Practice

Service Audit Partnership in London - peer auditing scheme - <http://www.hsaonline.org/sap/index.html>

Partnership between health, social services and local authority to provide services and housing for people with multiple needs. - Focus Multiple Needs Project - Prime Focus, Daimler House, Paradise Circus Birmingham 0121 687 5000

Various eg's of partnerships between police and outreach teams in London.

St Giles Trust (64-68 Camberwell Church Street London SE5 8DG) and St Mungos (1-3 Rockley Rd London W14 0DJ) both run projects in prisons.

Off the Streets and Into Work (OSW) are a partnership of orgs to deliver training and ed for clients (and more I think) 4th Floor The Pavillion, 1 Newhams Row, London SE1 3UZ

The Booth Centre has a partnership with the local authority who provide housing staff in the day centre - Manchester Cathedral, M3 1SX