Evaluation of Newcastle's 'Cooperative' Approach to the Prevention and Management of Homelessness in Light of Changing Government Policy: Executive Summary

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September 2013

Introduction

Since a previous evaluation was undertaken in 2011, organisations working to prevent and tackle homelessness in Newcastle have faced increasing difficulties, most notably as a result of cuts to public spending and welfare reform. The consensus that emerged from this evaluation was that, despite these difficulties, the local authority continues to provide and co-ordinate high quality services for homeless people and is seeking to develop and improve these services, particularly in areas of perceived weakness. Creative measures are being found to minimise the impact of the more severe cuts to public spending that are imminent, and to ensure that resources are used in the most strategic possible manner, but there are doubts as to whether the current high quality services can be maintained.

Statutory Homelessness Trends: How Does Newcastle Compare to Other Local Authorities?

Recent statutory homelessness trends in Newcastle were compared with those of other local authorities in England, particularly the other 'core' English cities, via analysis of published and unpublished *Homelessness Monitor* data.

While homelessness assessment decisions have risen dramatically in Newcastle over the past four years (as a result of changes in recording practices), the number of households accepted as owed the main statutory duty has fallen from 233 in 2009/10 to 220 in 2012/13. This (gently) falling trend in homelessness acceptances in Newcastle is out of step with patterns in England as a whole, where the overall number of acceptances has been rising steadily since 2009/10. It is likewise at variance with recent experience in most of the other core cities, where homelessness acceptances have generally been growing. The Newcastle trend is, however, consistent with the overall pattern in the North East region, where homelessness acceptances have been falling over the past four years (the only region in England where this is the case).

The number of households in temporary accommodation (TA) in Newcastle is very modest (the snapshot total at the end of March 2013 was 40). The total number of TA placements in Newcastle has been the lowest of all of the core cities at three of the last four financial year ends. The zero recorded usage of B&B in Newcastle is especially encouraging, given the consensus around the unsuitability of this form of TA, particularly for families with children.

The profile of reasons for homelessness in Newcastle broadly matches that of the core city average, and there has been only modest fluctuation in the relative importance of different causes over the past few years. The proportion of acceptances attributable to relationship breakdown has stayed steady, while there has been a modest increase in homelessness associated with exclusions by parents

or other friends and family. Mortgage and rent arrears account for very low numbers of homelessness acceptances in Newcastle, with the latter dropping to zero in the selected quarters studied since 2010/11. The low level of mortgage and rent arrears-related acceptances in Newcastle is in keeping with patterns in both the other core cities and in England as a whole, with the recent recession and housing market downturn having had little apparent impact on these indicators. As elsewhere in England, there appears to have been some recent growth in the importance of loss of private tenancies as a cause of homelessness in Newcastle.

Newcastle registers the second to highest rate of prevention activity of any of the core cities (29.6 prevention actions per 1,000 households). This rate of prevention activity is approximately double that of the core city average and more than three times the rate in England as a whole. One reasonable interpretation of these results would be that effective prevention practice in Newcastle is helping to achieve the low levels of statutory homelessness acceptances and TA placements noted above.

Impact of Changes to Government Policy

Reductions in funding to local authorities have largely been dealt with to date by efficiency savings, both on the part of the local authority itself and the voluntary and community sector (VCS). However, there were concerns expressed about some negative impacts of cuts: the loss of the Tenancy Relations Service, the reductions in face to face contact that was available from the Welfare Rights Service, the lack of money available for capital spending and a perceived reduction in availability of services for people with mental health problems or learning disabilities.

Welfare reform had not yet had an impact on homelessness but was expected to in the future for a range of reasons. A large increase in rent arrears at Your Homes Newcastle (YHN) following the introduction of the bedroom tax was the clearest indicator of future difficulties.

The Government's key initiative in the area of rough sleeping, No Second Night Out, was widely perceived to have had little impact, with the exception of the opportunity to secure funding from the Homeless Transition Fund for a Housing First scheme. Housing First has achieved some impressive early results and appears to be offering a valuable alternative option for some of the most problematic homeless people.

Strengths of Newcastle's Approach

The approach taken in Newcastle continues to be seen as an example for others to follow, both by those who work for the local authority and those who work with it. The strategic approach taken, the relationship between housing and welfare rights,

and the relationship between the local authority and the VCS are all seen as areas of strength.

Although there were some concerns expressed by VCS respondents about The Gateway limiting their flexibility, it continues to be regarded as a key element of the culture of prevention. Its role may be developed further with regard to allocating floating support; it is already being used to co-ordinate housing and material support through the Supporting Independence Scheme, although this scheme appears to have received fewer applications than was expected.

Relationships with the VCS continue to be widely regarded as a strength of Newcastle's approach, with faith groups becoming an increasingly important part of the holistic approach being taken to prevent and tackle homelessness. The creation of Active Inclusion Newcastle represents a further step forward in the strategic co-ordination of a wide range of services.

In addition to major political and financial support from Newcastle City Council, services to prevent homelessness continue to benefit from substantial subsidy from YHN, largely as a result of the profitability of its business ventures. The creation by the city council and YHN of the Prevention from Eviction Protocol, now referred to as the Sustaining Tenancy Guidance, continues to be seen as a major driver of the preventative approach being taken in Newcastle, particularly since its adoption within the supported housing sector. In addition, the YHN Young People's Service produces impressive results in terms of enabling young people to remain in the family home, supporting those who do move into their own tenancies to sustain them and reducing the number of evictions of young people from YHN properties. They are also involved in an innovative project to provide intensive support to the most problematic care leavers.

Some respondents expressed a desire for a more co-ordinated response to welfare reform. However, in the case of the change that may have the greatest impact within the city – the bedroom tax – it is clear that YHN has sought to offer a wide range of options to try to alleviate the impact.

Other positive elements of provision within Newcastle were the Tyne and Wear choice based letting system, which was reported to be working well for homeless people and the move of the temporary accommodation to Cherry Tree View, where the improved physical environment was seen as a factor that reduced the vulnerability of the people who stay there.

Areas of Possible Weakness

The work with private landlords was one of the greatest areas of change in recent years and also one was there most disagreement about the potential for future

development. The Private Rented Service becoming part of the Fairer Housing Unit and re-locating to the civic centre was seen to have benefits for tenants but to have damaged relationships with landlords, although steps were being taken to tackle this difficulty and the number of properties being offered by landlords was building back up. Efforts to improve the quality of properties offered by private landlords were seen as having some disadvantages, because they could increase the time taken for properties to become available.

Perceived barriers to an increased role for the private rented sector in tackling homelessness were cuts to benefits, the greater attractiveness of other potential tenants and the fundamentally different approach to letting to the one taken by social landlords. However, some respondents pointed to the diversity of private landlords and noted the success of Housing First and workers at Cherry Tree View in engaging with the private rented sector. All agreed, however, that financial incentives must continue to be offered for private landlords to engage with homeless people.

There were a number of linked possible areas of weakness with regard to single homeless men, particularly those with complex needs. Limited engagement of mental health services with homeless people continued to be seen as a difficulty, with housing organisations providing mental health training or employing their own mental health specialists seen as possible solutions. An increase in evictions from supported accommodation was a major area of concern and it was acknowledged that there was a group of people who moved between different forms of emergency accommodation. The more efficient allocation of resources was seen to have resulted in some of the most difficult people being concentrated in emergency accommodation, where there were particular problems associated with addictions.

While there was an acknowledgement by respondents that the issues affecting this group of people were very complex, there were a number of measures that were being taken to try to address these linked difficulties.   The creation of a traffic lights system to assess the readiness of people to move on from temporary/supported accommodation, and the holding of meetings between providers of supported and permanent housing, seemed particularly positive developments in relation to ensuring that single homeless people move on at the most appropriate time. The Common Case Management Group is another initiative designed to ensure that there is a strategic and co-ordinated approach to meeting the needs of the most chaotic people. Although work is still at an early stage, there were differing opinions about the likely impact of measures to provide more effective housing support to people who were leaving prison.

Hopes and Fears for the Future

Severe impending funding cuts were naturally a major concern for all respondents. While there was a consensus that Newcastle was starting from a very strong position, there were differing views as to how far services, and the culture of prevention, would be affected by these cuts. The local authority is seeking to maximise its limited resources by establishing contracts that are based around key groups, rather than forms of provision, with the implication that organisations will need to from consortia in order to bid for these contracts. This will require an acceleration of the move away from competition and towards collaboration, although fears were expressed that it may be difficult for smaller organisations and more specialist forms of provision to be maintained under this new system.