

Briefing Paper 19

Housing Scoping Paper – homeless advice and support

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Introduction

This briefing paper summarises one of the six scoping papers prepared for the housing work stream of the Third Sector Research Centre. The homelessness advice and support sector has a long and distinguished history not only in responding to individual housing needs of those experiencing homelessness and poor housing, but also in influencing government, policy and practice, developing innovative cross-sector partnership working, services and products. The ‘homelessness sector’ in its current form can be traced to the 1960s, when homelessness and poverty were ‘rediscovered’ in the public eye. The sector has remained at the forefront of important policy debates around social inclusion, social care and social justice. The sector is very diverse in terms of organisational types, functions and scale of activities, incorporating *housing advice services*, *supported housing*, and a highly fragmented sub-sector which is referred to in this paper as *housing related support*. This latter group of organisations provide a range of professional support, representation and networking functions. The common link between all of these organisations is a shared focus on homelessness prevention. This work has expanded greatly to incorporate wider policy concerns with worklessness, substance misuse and poor health associated with homelessness. The demand for such services has increased due to the credit crisis and economic downturn.

The briefing begins by exploring the origins and evolution of the homelessness sector, mapping organisation types, key roles, functions and characteristics. The full scoping paper expands on these themes in considering key policy, regulation and

funding issues facing different parts of the sector and uses case studies to illustrate the important work and impact of leading organisations in the homelessness sector.

This briefing includes illustrative case studies, and identifies key bodies and field leaders who could support the further development of the sector. It concludes by suggesting further research agendas that would contribute to a better understanding of issues affecting the wider third sector.

Defining the field

The homelessness sector embraces a wide range of organisational types, size and functions. What they all have in common is a shared focus on homelessness prevention. To get a sense of the diversity of the sector, broad labels are applied to differentiate these organisations. The term *housing advice sub-sector* is used to describe organisations offering homelessness advice, housing options and more generic legal housing advice. The *supported housing sub-sector* describes social housing providers – though not all registered with the Tenant Services Authority (TSA)¹ - whose main function is the provision of housing, care and support. Their services are primarily aimed at homeless people who are vulnerable and have complex needs, rather than those who have a general housing need. The boundaries between supported housing organisations and general needs housing association are often blurred. Many general needs housing associations also provide supported housing as a significant activity. Defining the *housing related support sub-sector* is even more problematic: the term includes a variety of organisations such as day centres, floating support, soup runs, campaigning

organisations etc who all contribute to incidences of homelessness and prevention. The paper simplifies this diversity by distinguishing two subgroups. Firstly, organisations funded under the Supporting People programme that provide individual *housing related support*, enabling people who have experienced homelessness or at risk of homelessness make the transition from homelessness to independent living. Secondly, third sector organisations that provide coordinated strategic, policy development, training and campaigning role on homelessness and related housing issues. These organisations support frontline delivery bodies, and often have a higher profile as they operate at regional and national levels.

Origins and evolution

Many of the leading names in the homelessness sector today can trace their origins to the 1960s after the broadcast of the highly influential Ken Loach television documentary drama *Cathy Come Home*, and the re-emergence of poverty. This period is marked by housing shortage and insecurity which contributed to increased levels of homelessness which highlighted the limitations of state provision at the time. However, many of the church led charitable organisations such as the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and the Salvation Army can trace their origin much further back (to the nineteenth century). The first generalist housing advice service was established by the Citizens Advice Bureaux (CAB) in 1939. One of the earliest specialist homelessness advice services was set up by the Catholic Housing Aid Society (CHAS) in 1956, in partnership with local churches and other community groups in London. CHAS' main aims were to raise awareness of homelessness and to influence policy at national and local levels. Its housing advice centres offered free and confidential advice to people in housing need, with a strong emphasis on housing rights, homelessness prevention, debt and welfare benefits. Its advocacy work on behalf of clients to housing departments provided a template for the rest of the housing advice sector. CHAS was an important pioneer in the early 1960s of the 'network model' of housing aid centres adopted later by a number of voluntary sector agencies such as Shelter. The 1960s was an important watershed in the evolution of the homelessness sector with the creation of a number of leading housing charities most notably Shelter, Crisis, St Mungo's and housing associations such as Notting Hill Housing Trust. The period also witnessed the

creation of SHAC (Shelter Housing Aid Centres), the UK's largest network of independent housing advice centres. Shelter, through its media and campaigning work, helped to shift public opinion, lever in much needed resources to the sector, and lobbied politicians and policy. The template for the modern form of housing with support attached can be traced to the 1960s through the work of housing charities like St Mungo's which opened a scheme for rough sleepers in South London run by volunteers.

The Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977 marked a major landmark in the development of the housing advice and wider homelessness sector. Local authority housing departments were given a new legal duty to provide housing, housing advice and assistance to people who met certain legal criteria. The 1970s saw a rapid expansion in advice centres specialising in housing law and welfare rights and the emergence of organisations offering professional support and networking opportunities for staff and organisations such as Federation of Information and Advice Centres (FIAC) (now Advice UK). CHAS coordinated the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Homelessness and Housing Need in 1989 with over 200 members from both Houses. More recently, Homeless Link, formed in 2001 merged with Resource Information Service in 2009 to become the national umbrella organisation for frontline homeless and support agencies with over 450 members offering a range of services including hostels, advice centres, health projects and outreach.

Key roles and functions

The homelessness sector is involved in homelessness prevention, social inclusion and combating worklessness.² The *housing advice* sector stands at the forefront of homelessness prevention, and is firmly embedded within a number of key government policies.³ Housing options' work with clients plays an important role in the new homelessness prevention ethos. Housing advice centres are increasingly seen as gateways to a wide range of services within local authority homelessness strategies. The *supported housing* sector plays an important role in helping vulnerable people live independently, develop life skills, participate fully within their local communities and the promotion of well-being. The core objective of *supported housing services* funded under the Supporting People programme is the delivery of quality of life outcomes and independence. The roles and functions of organisations within

the *housing related support* sector are much more diverse and have evolved over time. The activities range from day centres offering access to planned programmes of activity, support services and accommodation, through to umbrella organisations that undertake policy development, training, campaigning and professional networking opportunities to its members. Some organisations such as Shelter perform a number of these functions, combining policy development at local, regional and national level, with campaigning work and advice services to clients on a range of housing

recent years the sector has become more entwined with the direct delivery of many state policies through commissioning and tackling social exclusion. Much greater attention is given to well-being outcomes, overcoming institutional barriers, and the way that social and economic deprivation reinforce and reproduce social exclusion. The homelessness sector has developed innovative products, services, ways of working and cross-sector partnerships between the state and private sector. This has occurred against a shifting funding landscape, and a move towards outcome-based

Table 1 Main types of organisations and functions

Types	Functions
Housing advice sub-sector	Housing and homeless advice provided by local authorities Third sector specialist housing advice services Third sector legal advice services such as law centres Community Legal Services (CLS) funded solicitors Private sector organisations giving housing advice as part of their service (e.g. accommodation agencies, estate agents and banks) Generalist advice services (e.g. CABx, independent advice services)
Supported housing sub-sector	Housing associations (registered with Tenant Services Authority) that provide supported housing as a significant activity Unregistered specialist housing organisations providing housing products and services to homeless people with complex needs. Hostels
Housing related support sub-sector	Life skills Job training Family mediation Peer educators Advice and guidance on education, employment and training, resettlement Floating support Day centres
Professional support, umbrella and networking sub sector	Campaigning Policy development and research Capacity building Conferences and seminars Professional development and networking opportunities Human resources and recruitment

commissioning of services. Some organisations view these changes as a real challenge to their independence and traditional campaigning role.

St Basils in Birmingham is a major provider of supported accommodation for young people and a good example of the way that a homelessness

issues. The emergence of organisations such as SITRA can be seen as a response to the ‘professionalisation’ of the homelessness sector. They offer a range of bespoke services to organisations and individuals that might include consultancy, financial services, capacity building, training, and professional development opportunities.

Third sector characteristics

The organisations discussed in this paper come from a wide range of organisational types, size and structures. Underpinning the sector is a shared identity around homelessness prevention, a strong campaigning tradition and civic engagement ethos towards socially excluded communities and service users. The civil society origins of action on homelessness and poor housing were particularly evident in the 1960s and 70s. It was church based and other third sector organisations based in the community that took action and campaigned for change, eventually achieving statutory response in the the 1977 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act. In

agency has integrated prevention services, housing advice, family mediation, peer educators, resettlement and floating support. Much of this work is geared at smoothing the transition to independence. To achieve these goals St Basils engages with wider local, regional and national government agendas around worklessness, civic engagement and well-being.

Funding

Organisations within the homelessness sector are funded from a range of bodies. Historically, organisations have been reliant on a combination of state support, private finance (in the case of housing associations), charitable giving and fundraising. However over recent years, there has been a shift away from traditional grant aid, towards funding under specific national programmes (i.e. Supporting People, Legal Services Commission etc) on a commissioned basis. These developments have created uncertainty and pressure on some organisations to do

more with less. Smaller providers have found it increasingly difficult to meet both cost reductions and quality targets, whilst some have predicted a 'shake-out' of smaller third sector bodies from an increasingly professionalised sector. The economic downturn has also affected the ability of many of the larger homelessness organisations to generate income to maintain and develop services. These economic trends will provide a continuing challenge to the supply and demand for services; although to date recorded homelessness has risen less than might have been predicted in the early phases of the recession.

Representative/umbrella bodies

Representative and umbrella bodies have played a key role in the development and professionalization of the homelessness sector. They provide an important resource to organisations, through campaigning, policy research, capacity building, advice on fundraising and networking opportunities

- Association of Housing Advice Services (AHAS)
- Advice Services Alliance
- AdviceUK
- Centrepoint
- Citizens Advice
- Crisis -
- Homeless Link
- Housing Justice
- Law Centre Federation
- National Homelessness Advice Service (NHAS)
- National Housing Federation (NHF)
- Shelter
- Sitra

Key issues for further research

There are a number of gaps in the existing evidence base and cross-cutting issues that have wider implications for the third sector. These gaps relate to the size and contribution the sector has made towards many wider government policy agenda, which are at present difficult to measure. Further specific research on homelessness of relevance to TSRC might include:

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The credit crisis and economic downturn and the impact on levels of demand and capacity to respond within the homelessness sector.

The government's commitment to achieving *improved outcomes* for clients by making services more effective, efficient and integrated has been an important theme in the homelessness sector. There has much debate within the sector over the need to develop effective and transparent approaches that enable organisations to demonstrate the impact of its work in meeting government policies (i.e. homelessness intervention) without creating additional administrative burdens. This is particularly important from the perspective of funding bodies keen that organisations can demonstrate value.

The issue of commissioning for common outcomes has been at the heart of the commissioning process for the legal aid and Supporting People. Both funding streams have also been changing in ways that have made it difficult for service providers to plan ahead (cost pressure and quality standards and in the case of SP the end of ring fencing and incorporation in more general local area agreement funding).

Effective *partnership working* has been a strong theme within the homelessness sector. This is a real challenge for parts of the sector as it develops regional frameworks aimed at promoting cross authority and cross sector working (i.e. health, housing and social care sector etc).

Footnotes

- ¹ The regulatory body for social landlords, including housing associations, and from 2010 Arms Length Management Organisations and local authority housing departments
- ² DCLG (2006) Homelessness Prevention: a Guide to Good Practice

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