



Evaluation of the Open House Programme for people sleeping rough

The Crisis Open House programme for people sleeping rough outside the major conurbations has been successful in delivering low-cost emergency accommodation but its success as a policy innovation has been more limited, according to an evaluation of five 'Open Houses' by Nicholas Pleace of the Centre for Housing Policy, University of York. He found:

- f** Over 15 months the five schemes provided 29,468 nights of accommodation to 1,458 homeless people. There was very marked variation between areas; the least busy project experienced less than one-twentieth of the number of stays reported by the most busy.
- f** The projects were successful in attracting residents with extensive experience of rough sleeping and prolonged experience of homelessness, reflecting the programme's emphasis on tolerance.
- f** To reduce costs, the projects (which had funding for three years) used existing sites and buildings converted to minimum standards. The use of such sites created operational problems for three of the five projects.
- f** Open House was designed to operate in areas where there was little or no other service provision for people sleeping rough. The programme was successful in this respect, but a relatively low level of funding for each project and the very limited extent of other services for rough sleepers in their areas, meant that it was often very difficult to arrange access to resettlement services or move-on accommodation for most residents.
- f** The projects functioned effectively as low-cost night shelters and were innovative in some respects, but they were not a new form of service. The Open Houses were not able to provide a route out of rough sleeping for most of their residents.
- f** The research provides further confirmation that the needs of people sleeping rough are often highly complex. A significant core of people said they had been homeless for years and sometimes decades. Many had very poor health. Rough sleepers were unlikely to receive assistance from social landlords and encountered problems in attempting to use the health service and community care services. ┘

The Open House programme

There is evidence that street homelessness, or 'rough sleeping', has become a social problem in many smaller towns and cities within England. In response, the homeless charity Crisis decided to develop a network of shelter provision for people sleeping rough via a programme called Open House.

Open House was designed to provide a number of year-round emergency shelters. The Open Houses would be based in existing buildings that would be converted at minimum cost, with revenue funding from Crisis for up to three years. Local voluntary groups would take the lead in developing and managing the projects with Crisis overseeing the Open Houses.

Projects were to be developed in areas where there was little or no other provision and would have a highly tolerant admissions policy, with the aim of attracting marginalised rough sleepers.

Rather than just being emergency accommodation, the projects were also intended to provide advice and assistance to help vulnerable homeless people to move into and subsequently manage within ordinary housing. As part of this role, Open Houses would act as referral points to a range of other agencies, including health and social services.

Each project was also designed to function as a means of encouraging the development of permanent services for people sleeping rough. Since the projects had a life of only three years, it was intended that each should have a role as a catalyst, encouraging local statutory and voluntary agencies to develop more permanent provision.

Up to 17 Open Houses were planned. The first opened in Crawley in 1994, followed by projects in Cambridge and Stevenage in the autumn of 1995 and Doncaster in the winter of 1995. A fifth project opened in Gloucester in early 1996. This study conducted a two-year evaluation of these first five projects.

The success of Open House in meeting its objectives

The five projects were monitored for 15 months. In this time, they provided 29,498 nights of accommodation to 1,458 homeless people over the

course of 2,438 stays (56 per cent of stays were made by individuals staying more than once). There was a marked variation between the projects. Cambridge and Gloucester functioned in a very similar way to inner-city night shelters and experienced a high number of stays and many repeat visits. Stevenage and Crawley experienced much lower numbers of stays, which tended to be longer, and they were less likely to receive repeat visits. Cambridge was the most busy project, with 20 times more stays than the least busy in Stevenage (Cambridge also provided three times as many nights of accommodation).

Although the projects were intended to be direct access accommodation, the project in Stevenage was not able to operate on this basis. While activity in the project was lower than any of the others, this seems to have been largely related to over-provision for women. The use of converted sites created severe operational problems for the project in Doncaster because of a lack of space. Similar issues existed in Cambridge and the use of Portakabins on an open site in Crawley was linked to security problems.

This accommodation was provided at a low cost (approx. £700,000 for the five projects over one year), with an average revenue expenditure of approximately £143,000 across the five projects. The cost per resident per night ranged between £23 and £53, projects with higher resident numbers having lower costs. There was a marked difference in the amount of Housing Benefit received by each project; two projects received over £17 a night, two received under £7. Expenditure was similar to the cost of running winter shelters.

Four of the projects were developed in areas where there was little or no other service provision. In Cambridge, a range of services for homeless people was already in existence, but demand for the project was higher than for any of the other Open Houses.

Attracting marginalised people

The evaluation found that the Open Houses' tolerant admissions policy meant that some of the most marginalised individuals in the homeless population did make use of the schemes. Staff and residents reported accepting intoxicated people into the shelters and no one was permanently banned for

poor behaviour. Four of the projects accepted a limited number of dogs with their owners (Doncaster's site was too small to permit this).

Developing resettlement services

Other aspects of the Open House programme were less successful. The projects were unable to develop resettlement services for their residents because they had only limited resources available. Only 8 per cent of stays concluded with referrals into hostel accommodation, B&Bs or some form of housing. At the close of 1,511 stays (62 per cent), no one knew where the resident had gone.

With the partial exception of Stevenage, the projects were unable to function as referral points to other services for their residents. In four areas, access to health and social services for residents was poor. This was outside the projects' control; other research has repeatedly demonstrated that rough sleepers have very poor access to community care and the services provided by Registered Social Landlords.

The Open Houses had not been successful as catalysts or agents for the development of more permanent services for people sleeping rough in their areas. However, the evaluation only followed the projects for the first two years of operation.

The residents

There was further evidence that rough sleepers are among the most marginalised and vulnerable groups in society. As would be expected, Open House residents were predominantly male (88 per cent), white (94 per cent) and middle-aged (average age 33). Again as reported elsewhere, there was limited evidence of more young people and women sleeping rough than used to be the case (25 per cent of residents were under 25). The proportion of women who were young was much higher than the proportion of men (51 per cent of women were under 25, compared to 25 per cent of men). Over half (54 per cent) of residents had experience of sleeping rough and 18 per cent had slept rough for more than three months out of the last year. While a third of the residents had been homeless for a week or less, an equal proportion had been homeless for more than a year and 14 per cent of residents had been homeless

for more than five years.

Just over half the residents reported a health problem. Mental health problems, drug addiction and alcohol addiction were the most common. Many other severe or potentially severe health problems were also reported. Only 56 per cent of residents reporting a health problem were being treated for it. The likelihood of having a health problem and not being treated for it rose with experience of rough sleeping and homelessness.

Women and young people were less likely to have extensive experience of rough sleeping and homelessness than men.

There was strong evidence of high geographical mobility among the residents. People who had arrived in the town that day accounted for almost a third of all stays. Many residents had travelled considerable distances before reaching an Open House. While Cambridge was the only scheme where most residents were from outside the area, none of the Open Houses was providing an entirely local service. The reason that Gloucester and Cambridge had a much higher proportion of residents from outside the area compared with the other three projects was not clear. The research results, which echo those of earlier work, indicate that rough sleeping cannot be seen simply as a 'local' problem to which local solutions can be found. However, there was no evidence from the research to suggest that the Open Houses were attracting homeless people into the areas where they operated, since there was already an existing homelessness problem before they began operations.

Living and working in the Open Houses

The staff teams in the Open Houses were very committed. They tended to work long hours and experience considerable stress. Staffing levels were sometimes inadequate. Four out of the five projects had difficulty recruiting volunteers, which sometimes added to the pressures on staff.

Residents' views of the projects and the staff were overwhelmingly positive. Residents compared the Open Houses favourably with other emergency accommodation for rough sleepers.

Conclusion

The characteristics of the residents, and the findings of this and earlier research, draw into question the effectiveness of very basic and relatively low-cost services like Open House in dealing with the vulnerability and varied needs of rough sleepers. The evidence suggests that in many instances rough sleepers may need a package of health, community care and social support services (as well as access to suitable housing) in order to resettle in the community. In some instances, this support may need to be effectively permanent to prevent a return to homelessness. The Open Houses were unable to offer such resettlement services.

About the study

The research was carried out by Nicholas Pleace at the Centre for Housing Policy, University of York and used a combination of statistical monitoring and interviews.

How to get further information

A full report of the research, entitled *The Open House Programme for People Sleeping Rough: An Evaluation* will shortly be published as a Centre for Housing Policy research report (price £10 plus £1 p&p, ordering information 01904 433691, Fax 01904 432318, ja9@york.ac.uk or <http://www.york.ac.uk/inst/chp/pub.htm>). Further information is available from Nicholas Pleace (01904 433703, np3@york.ac.uk). A summary version of the report will also be made available on CHP's web pages which are located at (<http://www.york.ac.uk/inst/chp/>).

The following *Findings* look at related issues:

- Helping people on low income secure private rented accommodation, Sept 96 (*H193*)
- Housing benefit and supported housing, Mar 97 (*H206*)
- Developing strategies for single homeless people, Mar 97 (*H207*)
- The impact of housing benefit changes on help to secure private rented accommodation, Jun 97 (*H213*)
- Single people's access to social housing, Jun 97 (*H214*)
- Living in bed and breakfast in the 1990s, Sept 97 (*H221*)
- The family background of young homeless people, Dec 97 (*H229*)

Full details of all JRF *Findings* and other publications can be found on our website: <http://www.jrf.org.uk>. If you do not have access to the Internet or have any further queries on publications, contact the Publications Office on 01904 615905 (direct line/answerphone for publications queries only).



Published by the
Joseph Rowntree Foundation
The Homestead, 40 Water End, York YO3 6LP
Tel: 01904 629241 Fax: 01904 620072
<http://www.jrf.org.uk>
ISSN 0958-3084

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation is an independent, non-political body which has supported this project as part of its programme of research and innovative development projects, which it hopes will be of value to policy-makers and practitioners. The findings presented here, however, are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation.