

Developing strategies for single homeless people

While homelessness among single people is now recognised as a national problem, there is much that can be done at a local level to address it. A report by CHAR (Housing Campaign for Single People) examines the extent of strategic working for single homeless people across the country and identifies the positive benefits and outcomes of adopting such an approach.

f Over half of local housing authorities are developing strategic working for single homeless people, but there is a wide variation in how authorities define such a strategy.

f A strategy may cover all single homeless people or may be focused on a specific group, for example, homeless people with mental health problems.

f The key components of any strategy are: multi-agency working; assessment of needs; audit of provision; identification of gaps in provision; and the development of an action plan with agreed priorities to meet the gaps.

f Authorities with a strategy have closer and more formal links with a wider range of agencies than those with no strategy. The main factors leading to joint working are shared concern about single homelessness and a mutual understanding and recognition of the need to work together.

f Authorities with a strategy have made much more positive progress - under the Children Act and NHS and Community Care Act - for single homeless people, than those without a strategy.

f The benefits of local single homelessness strategies include: maximising the use of existing resources; improved funding opportunities; improved services; an increase in provision; improved inter-agency working; provision of a common information base; avoidance of duplication of provision; and the encouragement of new ways of working along with the promotion of good practice.

f Little has been done to ensure that the views of single homeless people are incorporated into any strategy. While many strategies consulted homeless people, on the whole this tended to be via one-off surveys or else through discussion with agencies working with homeless people.

f Many strategies had not set up monitoring and reviewing procedures.

Authorities with a strategy

The study's survey revealed that 54 per cent of local housing authorities have developed or are involved in developing local strategies on the issue of single homelessness. Of these strategies, 55 per cent are for single homeless people as a general group, 39 per cent are for young homeless people only and 6 per cent are strategies specifically for homeless people with mental health problems.

Over a third of strategies identified in the survey are led by the local authority housing department, with 13 per cent led by a combination of agencies and 3 per cent by housing and social services. This compares to 8 per cent of strategies being led by voluntary sector agencies and 6 per cent by housing and voluntary sector agencies.

It is not only large, urban authorities who are developing local single homelessness strategies. A significant number of smaller towns and rural districts are involved in strategic working for this group.

Thirty-five per cent of authorities felt that their strategy had met its aims/objectives, with 29 per cent feeling that it had partly done so.

Twenty per cent of those authorities without a strategy are intending to develop one, and 8 per cent are already engaged in discussions. However, 55 per cent of this group of authorities do not intend to develop a single homeless strategy.

Strategy development

Single homelessness strategies tend to develop over time or to come about as the result of forums or specific meetings or conferences on single homelessness. The main triggers for setting up single homelessness strategies are an increase in single homelessness in the local area along with the recognition that there is a severe lack of appropriate accommodation, support and other provision for this group.

The key components of a single homelessness strategy include multi-agency working, an assessment of needs, an audit of provision (identifying gaps in provision) and the development of an action plan with agreed priorities to meet these gaps.

Joint working

From the survey, the main factors in promoting and encouraging joint working are the shared concern about single homeless people and a mutual understanding of the need to work together.

Authorities with a strategy tend to be working with a wider range of agencies than those without a strategy. The agencies that tend to be involved in working together on single homelessness strategies are the housing department, social services, housing associations, probation and voluntary sector agencies. However, other key agencies, such as the health and education authorities and the Benefits Agency, were rarely included.

In 70 per cent of areas with a single homeless strategy a local homeless or special needs forum had played a central role in influencing the development of the strategy.

The presence of committed individuals is a significant factor in encouraging joint working and strategic approaches.

Assessment of needs

In order to formulate a relevant and effective single homelessness strategy, the evidence points to the benefits of starting with a comprehensive picture of the housing and support needs of single homeless people. This can then be examined along with an audit of existing provision, and gaps in provision and unmet needs can be identified. This information can form the basis of a single homelessness strategy and a list of priorities for action can be drawn up.

In over three-quarters of those areas with a strategy an assessment of need of single homeless people has been carried out, compared to 21 per cent of those areas without a strategy. Those authorities with a strategy have more information available to them and have been able to use this information more effectively, for example, to influence policy and to develop new services.

The Children Act

The Children Act was the impetus for the development of local strategies in 18 per cent of authorities. Those authorities with a strategy are much more likely to have established written agreements with social services under the Children Act (60 per cent) and joint assessment procedures (47

per cent), compared to 30 per cent and 29 per cent of those authorities without a strategy.

Community care

Although there has still been very little progress made for single homeless people under the NHS and Community Care Act 1990, the survey revealed that those authorities with a single homelessness strategy have made more positive progress under this legislation than those without a strategy. Twelve per cent of local housing authorities with a strategy have established written agreements between themselves and social services on their respective responsibilities under the legislation, compared to 9 per cent of authorities without a strategy. Fifty-two per cent of authorities with a strategy have developed joint assessment procedures with social services under the provisions of the NHS and Community Care Act, compared to 35 per cent of authorities without a strategy.

Forty-four per cent of authorities with a strategy identified that their policy and practice had positively changed towards single homeless people as a result of the community care legislation, compared to 14 per cent of authorities without a strategy.

Consulting homeless people

While many strategies included consultation with homeless people, on the whole this tended to be via one-off surveys or else through discussion with agencies which work with homeless people. The research did not come across any positive models for effective consultation that enabled the views of single homeless people to be incorporated into any strategy. Further research on this area is required.

Conclusion

While single homelessness strategies do involve a significant amount of hard work in setting up and maintaining them, the researchers conclude that they bring a range of benefits, including:

- improved services and an increase in the provision available to single homeless people. Over half the strategies resulted in new projects and/or provision for single homeless people;
- better targeting of existing resources and increased opportunities for gaining additional funding;

- improved inter-agency working, with agencies working to the same aim, and developing better co-ordination, clarity and consistency of approach;
- better understanding of the problem; and
- more comprehensive information on needs and required provision.

Clear themes emerged that are common to all the areas that have developed strategies. These factors appear to be crucial and central to all single homelessness strategies. They are: commitment; comprehensiveness; co-ordination; flexibility; responsiveness; focus; practical basis; multi-agency approach; shared ownership; information; consensus and recognition of support needs.

The full report identifies specific positive initiatives that have emerged as a result of local single homelessness strategies, including the setting-up of rent guarantee/bond schemes, the development of new build and self-build accommodation and the establishment of 'floating support' teams for single people taking up/having difficulty with permanent tenancies.

About the study

The study involved two stages. The first stage was a postal questionnaire survey of all English and Welsh local housing authorities, which aimed to identify the extent of strategic working for single homeless people across the country. The response rate was 50 per cent. From the questionnaire data a number of areas were identified as being involved in positive working for single homeless people, and were either involved in developing a local single homelessness strategy or had a fairly well-established strategy in place. The second stage involved face-to-face interviews with a range of statutory and voluntary agencies in the identified areas. The information from these interviews forms the basis of the detailed accounts of the strategies described in the report.

Further information

The full report provides a range of alternative approaches and gives detailed examples of a variety of single homelessness strategies across the country.

Where there's a will ...: Developing single homelessness strategies , by Jacqui McCluskey, is available from CHAR (Housing Campaign for Single People), 5-15 Cromer St, London WC1H 8LS (price £9.00 or £6.75 for CHAR members - including p&p, ISBN 0 906951 78 X).

Related *Findings*

The following *Findings* look at related issues:

- 153 Housing vulnerable single homeless people (Sept 95)
- 169 Housing homeless people in the private rented sector (Mar 96)
- 178 The housing needs of ex-prisoners (Apr 96)
- 184 Effective site and project management techniques for community self-build (Jun 96)
- 193 Helping people on low incomes secure private rented accommodation (Sept 96)

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 Sally Corrie, Publications Officer, 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
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.