

Single people's access to social housing

Despite the increase in single-person households and the problem of single homelessness, single people fare least well in allocations of social housing. A study of local authority and housing association policies and practices, conducted by Isobel Anderson and James Morgan, found that:

f Three-quarters of the local authorities surveyed attempted to identify the housing needs of single people. However, many council waiting-list priority schemes did not reflect the range of housing needs commonly experienced by single people and, in particular, took no account of insecure accommodation.

f In England and Wales, nearly two-thirds of local authorities excluded young people aged 16 and 17 years from eligibility for tenancies - a practice which is illegal in Scotland.

f Local authorities were not fully meeting their statutory duties to single homeless people who were classed as 'vulnerable' under the homelessness legislation. Only half always or usually awarded priority to single homeless people who were registered disabled, had learning difficulties or had mental health problems.

f Where the homelessness legislation allows more discretion, less than a quarter of local authorities always or usually awarded priority to homeless single people who: had drug or alcohol problems; were aged 16-17 or 18-24; or had been in care but applied some time after leaving care.

f More than half of local authorities said they sometimes offered single people tenancies on condition that support was available: usually those who were care leavers, leaving institutions or had mental health problems.

f Housing association priority schemes were described as being more sensitive to the needs of single people, but local authorities reported that only one in six of their nominations to housing associations were single people.

f Procedures by which other specialist agencies made referrals for social housing were beneficial to single people, but these accounted for only a small proportion of allocations.

f Some groups of single people received very low priority from all agencies, particularly those who were: roofless; leaving the armed forces; leaving prison; refugees or asylum seekers; or experiencing drug or alcohol problems.

This study aimed to examine the policies and practices of social housing providers (councils and housing associations) towards single people. The study included Scotland, England and Wales, taking account of legal and administrative variations across Britain.

Housing demand and supply

Almost three-quarters of local authorities surveyed attempted to identify the housing needs of single people within their areas. In 1994/5, across housing departments surveyed, on average, more than a third of waiting-list applicants were single people (under retirement age) but only a quarter of all lettings went to single people. This was despite the fact that more than a third of annual lettings were one-bedroom/bedsit properties. In addition, single people comprised nearly one-third of homelessness applications, but only one-sixth of those rehoused under the homelessness provisions.

Council waiting-list priority schemes

Local authorities used a wide range of criteria to prioritise waiting-list applications, but many failed to take account of the insecurity of accommodation which is often closely associated with single people's needs (Figure 1).

Although schemes took some account of insecurity through other indicators, such as overcrowding or sharing amenities, many failed to distinguish between the needs of single applicants experiencing different degrees of insecurity. Consequently, allocations were not necessarily made to those in greatest need.

Some council allocation policies discriminated against single people in a way that was not related to housing need: for example, by giving more points to couples than single people in the same housing circumstances. In priority schemes, broadly, single people experienced slight disadvantage on council housing waiting lists relative to couples without children, and much more significant disadvantage relative to families.

A critical restriction for access to council housing was the differentiation between treatment of young people aged 16 and 17 and those aged 18 and over. More than two-fifths of authorities would not include single people and childless couples under 18 on the housing waiting list and nearly two-thirds would not allocate tenancies to those groups. In Scotland, legally, all individuals are eligible to apply for, and be allocated, council housing from the age of 16. Consequently, young single people in certain areas of England and Wales are being treated less favourably than in other parts of the country.

Figure 1 Circumstances taken into account in prioritising local authority waiting-list applications

More than three-quarters of local authorities took account of:

- medical factors
- overcrowding
- lack of amenities
- shared facilities
- shared accommodation

Between half and three-quarters took account of:

- time on the waiting list
- separated families
- property condition
- social factors
- children in suitable accommodation
- underoccupation
- elderly people in unsuitable accommodation

Just half took account of :

- hostel accommodation

Less than half took account of :

- single homelessness (non-statutory)
- rooflessness
- insecurity of accommodation, other than rooflessness

Source: postal survey of local authorities

Homelessness and priority need

The study found that some local authorities were failing to meet their statutory duties to single homeless people and a substantial degree of discretionary decision-making was evident. Informal 'gatekeeping' by reception and other staff could divert single applicants away from specialist officers and a full investigation of their priority need circumstances.

Table 1 shows that even when single homeless people meet the criteria for priority need set out in the homelessness legislation, local authorities did not necessarily accept them as statutorily homeless. Only around half of authorities said they would always or usually accept single homeless people who had mental health problems, learning difficulties or were registered disabled as being in priority need.

Single homeless people may also be vulnerable for 'other special reasons'. Figure 2 shows the responses of local authorities to a range of possible circumstances. Those who had the support or involvement of other statutory or voluntary agencies were much more likely to receive priority than those who referred themselves.

There was some evidence of positive responses towards youth homelessness, particularly with respect to 16- and 17-year-olds leaving care. For

Table 1 Vulnerability of single homeless people (mental health, learning difficulties, and disability)

Circumstance	Always/usually accepted % of LAs	Sometimes accepted % of LAs	Never accepted % of LAs	Don't know % of LAs	N (100%)
Mental health problems (inpatient treatment)	49	47	2	2	176
Mental handicap/ learning difficulties	51	47	2	0	182
Physical disability - registered disabled	51	49	0	0	186

Source: postal survey of local authorities

Figure 2 Special reasons for priority need

Single homeless people most likely to be considered vulnerable (half or more of local authorities would always or usually award priority):

- people leaving long-stay mental/psychiatric hospital
- 16-17 year olds, on leaving care
- young people referred under the Children Act
- people at risk of domestic, racial or other violence

Single homeless people least likely to be considered vulnerable (a quarter or fewer local authorities would always or usually award priority):

- people with mental or physical health problems - self-reporting
- people with drug problems
- people with alcohol problems
- young people, age alone (16-17 and 18-24)
- care leavers, applying some time after leaving care
- people leaving prison
- people leaving the armed forces
- people who were refugees or asylum seekers
- people who were roofless

Source: postal survey of local authorities

young people aged 18-24, however, the chances of being accepted as vulnerable on age alone or because of a care background declined significantly. This could mean that where care leavers found difficulties on first leaving care (for example in coping with a tenancy) the appropriate 'safety net' may not operate a second time. Although high priority was generally awarded in situations of domestic or racial violence, some authorities never awarded priority for racial harassment. People leaving prison were among those least likely to be given priority need status by local authorities.

Making offers and tenancy support

In allocating vacancies, fairly strict bedroom standards were applied. Single people and couples without children were given similar consideration for one-bedroom properties. However, single people were treated much less favourably than couples or sharing adults for two-bedroom properties.

Where proportions of the stock were in low demand, pressures to fill these vacancies meant that they were often offered to applicants with the least choice. Where single people in housing need were disadvantaged in priority systems, they were often offered the least desirable accommodation.

Two-fifths of local authorities surveyed said they provided support to vulnerable single people to assist them in a tenancy. This mainly involved housing managers liaising with other agencies on behalf of vulnerable tenants. Few authorities employed specialist resettlement or support workers and few provided furnished tenancies. More than half of local authorities said they sometimes offered tenancies only on condition that support was available from social services or a voluntary agency. This condition would mainly be implemented where prospective tenants had mental health problems; were leaving care or had been referred under the Children Act; or were leaving institutions or being rehoused under care in the community procedures. More than three-fifths of authorities who allocated tenancies to applicants under 18 said they would require a guarantor for rent or other tenancy matters.

Housing associations

Although housing association policies were not examined to the same degree, they were generally sensitive to the needs of single people. Associations appeared to be addressing the needs of homeless households in ways which did not exclude single people, for example by making no distinction between statutory and non-statutory homelessness

and by giving priority to 'roofless' applicants and those in other insecure situations. However, housing associations usually offer at least half of their vacancies to local authority nominees and councils reported that only around one in six applicants nominated to associations were single people. In addition, local authorities have a strategic influence over housing association development activities in their areas, which would reflect the priorities of the authority, rather than individual associations.

Alternative routes into housing

Agency referrals to local authorities and housing associations could often be beneficial to single people, but accounted for only a very small proportion of lettings. Referral procedures appeared most favourable to young people, especially care leavers and/or those referred under the Children Act. Most housing authorities were involved in preparing community care plans and co-operated in providing housing for clients, but it was not clear that many single people were being assisted through this route.

Low priority groups in referral procedures included: ex-prisoners/ex-offenders; drug/alcohol users and refugees/asylum seekers.

Conclusion

The study confirmed the complexities facing social housing providers in measuring and prioritising different aspects of housing need across varying household types. There was substantial variation in policy and practice across local authorities and housing associations, but overall the study indicated only limited progress towards positive responses to single homelessness.

About the study

The study aimed to provide information on local authority and housing association policy and practice regarding single people in relation to both homelessness and other access routes to social housing. Data were collected from three main sources: an analysis of policy and procedural documents on allocations and homelessness from a

sample of local authority housing departments and housing associations; a postal questionnaire survey of all local housing authorities in England, Scotland and Wales (with a response rate of 42%); and case studies of policy and practice among agencies in five local authority areas.

Further information

A full report by the authors, *Social housing for single people? A study of local policy and practice* is available, priced £10.00 from Sarah Pugh at the Housing Policy and Practice Unit, University of Stirling, Stirling FK9 4LA (01786 467719). For further information, please contact: Isobel Anderson at the same address (isobel.anderson@stir.ac.uk) or James Morgan, School of Planning and Housing, Edinburgh College of Art/Heriot Watt University, 79 Grassmarket, Edinburgh EH1 2HJ (0131 221 6162, j.morgan@eca.ac.uk).

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