

The impact of the Coalition austerity drive on English statutory homeless service delivery

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Introduction

In legal terms a person(s) is entitled to present as homeless to an English local authority if they are threatened with homelessness within 28 days. For the authority to accept a full duty it must further be determined that the household had not made themselves intentionally homeless, have a local connection and reach the threshold of priority need. In respect of the latter a household would normally be assessed as vulnerable if it contained dependent children, a pregnant person, a person under 18, or a care leaver under 21; alongside these are categories that require more interpretation, such as vulnerability due to health issues, institutionalisation, violence, or older age. Over the last decade or so the main political parties in England have remained committed to reducing statutory homelessness levels and rooflessness through the adoption of preventative strategies. For example alongside accepting eligible households as statutorily homeless, with a legal duty to provide settled accommodation, local authority housing option services (LAHOS's hereafter) may provide financial assistance or support to ensure a household can remain in their home, or secure alternative private rented accommodation.

It has been argued that the main political motive for prevention schemes are to ease pressure on oversubscribed social housing, and avoid 'damaging' homeless statistics, rather than a genuine desire to assist those in housing difficulty, meaning 'non vulnerable' households may struggle to access these services (Lund, 2011). Further, it has been found that stringent targets and the need to ration scarce resources (alongside inadequate training around housing law) may lead to unlawful gatekeeping (Reeve and Batty, 2011), whereby households are denied their legal right to present as homeless.

Due to an assessed link between scarce resources and gatekeeping, it was predicted that LAHOS users may experience worse outcomes in the current politically austere climate. Since the Coalition Government came to power in 2010 its main policy objective of reducing public spending has meant cuts to both central and local budgets, and local authority departments and expenditure toward housing and welfare is at its lowest level since 1945 (Nevin and Leather, 2012). Alongside this, the Coalition has charged LAHOS's with identifying cost savings and in some cases front-line staff have been reduced through redundancy and redeployment (ONS, 2011). Further, recent research has shown that welfare cuts and related policy changes introduced by the Coalition have lessened the options available to low income households. For example whilst social housing has been perennially scarce, reforms relating to local housing allowance have meant that private rented accommodation is becoming increasingly unaffordable. For example Lister et al. (2011) estimated that as a result of the shortfall between LHA and due rent over 90% of private rented stock in just over a third of local authorities (excluding London) will be unaffordable by 2023, rising to 60% by 2030.

When these factors are taken in conjunction, it is perhaps unsurprising that statutory homelessness acceptances (Gov.UK, 2014), and households requiring help due to the threat of homelessness (Fitzpatrick et al., 2012) have followed an upward trend, with the former having risen by nearly a quarter following the economic downturn (DCLG, 2014). Alongside this the Localism Act has provided LAHOS's with new powers to discharge a homeless duty into private rented accommodation. If utilised this essentially weakens the position of a household in terms of the security of tenure they can expect if accepted

as homeless. This is because private tenants are normally given an assured shorthold tenancy, whereby landlords are only required to provide a six month agreement, whereas local authority or housing association tenancies offer longer term security of tenure (Fitzpatrick et al., 2012).

Service delivery in an age of austerity

To explore in greater detail how the current political climate is impacting on statutory homelessness and housing advice services a national baseline survey and follow on interviews with a selection of line managers and staff were carried out by the author between December 2012 and July 2013. A total of 272 practitioners completed the survey, and 27 practitioners in 12 LAHOS departments participated in interviews.

The survey findings, in line with other research in this area, confirmed that statutory homelessness acceptances had increased, with three-fifths of LAHOS stating that they had risen in their area. Further, around 40% of practitioners surveyed felt the ability to undertake the role was adversely affected by the resulting heavy workload, and nearly half due to departmental budgetary decreases. In a similar vein nearly all interviewees reported a higher workload due to the impact of welfare cuts and many felt this growth would continue as austerity measures continued to take hold.

When survey respondents were asked to consider the current challenges faced the most common response was local housing allowance reform, cited by nine out of 10; this was closely followed by welfare reform/general effects of the downturn and lack of private rented accommodation, with each being cited by over four-fifths of respondents. All but one survey respondent named at least one challenge to service delivery, and 99% cited two or more; just over 70% of respondents reported five or more challenges. An equally high number of challenges were reported in the minority of LAHOS where statutory acceptances had not increased. The follow up interviews suggested that this was likely to reflect a growth in households seeking help who were not necessarily owed a full housing duty. These findings provide a strong indication that

LAHOS's are under considerable pressure in the current climate.

All practitioners who reported challenges to the service were asked in what ways these impacted upon their ability to effectively undertake the role. Over half of survey respondents felt unable to give appropriate advice and assistance to all who required it and a similar number reported that unacceptable alternatives may be offered to some service users. In support of this some interviewees reported that an increased requirement to ration services had meant further barriers had been put up. For instance one practitioner said that they had previously allowed service users directly into their offices, but this ceased due to an increase in footfall, another stated that in the near future service users would no longer be able to contact them directly by telephone, as a central department was to be set up which would field all calls.

The interviews were able to provide a richer understanding of the pressured environment in which front-line staff operated. For example many officers advised that whilst groups assessed as 'vulnerable' tended to be prioritised, resource shortages would result in authorities practicing unlawful gatekeeping. The pressures most reported by interviewees included a lack of temporary accommodation and concerns around increasing statutory homelessness numbers due to the rise in footfall over the last few years, which is supported by official figures highlighted in the introduction.

'I have got into a situation where I am turning around and saying to people, your priority need, you fit the criteria, go away, I have got nothing for you' (Manager, LAHOS B).

Sending people away due to a lack of local connection was also remarked to be as a result of inadequate staffing within any given authority, which a few practitioners advised had worsened in recent years.

As touched upon above, adequate (particularly legal) training is viewed as an important element to ensure effective delivery, yet less than

a handful of LAHOS's interviewed felt training was sufficient in their department. Alongside workload issues resource scarcity was a central factor in understanding the lack of training and in some cases this was overtly connected to the choices departments were required to make in the current austere climate:

'Since the cuts last year we were basically told we had the choice between losing one member of staff or there would be no more training in the next few years. But they had to save money, it is really really horrifying how much money they have had to save' (Officer One, LAHOS J).

Finally, although administration difficulties due to lack of staffing resources and suitable landlords were commonly reported, some interviewees stated that their authority planned to embrace elements of the Localism Act. Of particular concern was the suggestion by a few interviewees that the Act could be used to prevent people making a homeless application in the first place, as households may be discouraged if led to believe social housing would not be awarded if they were accepted as statutorily homeless.

The impact of austerity on homelessness services

Whilst LAHOS are a perennially lean service the findings of this research indicate that greater challenges are faced in the current austere climate due to a lower level of available resources and greater workload levels as a result of an increase in service users. Related to this a few authorities were setting up enhanced 'screening' to make it harder for households at threat of homelessness to see a specialist adviser, which may increase incidences of preventable homelessness.

Of particular concern was that nearly all interviewees reported practices of gatekeeping to protect limited resources and reduce homeless acceptances. This may ultimately hide the true picture of homelessness, which may in turn impact upon the level of resources assessed as necessary to tackle it. Dependent on the focus

of the authority we may develop very different insights into the extent to which there is a homelessness problem in a particular area, which will likely be formed on the basis of how it is recorded, rather than the actual reality. It is argued that if the number of households losing their home is shrouded in these ways, this may arguably give politicians less reason to address this important issue.

Conclusion

It is concluded that as the likelihood of practitioners practicing gatekeeping is chiefly linked to resource scarcity and the requirement to ration services, its incidence is likely to progressively worsen in the current political climate. It is also important to note that suitable quality training may also suffer due to funding shortages, which will have a negative impact on the provision of effective advice. Linked to this was a concern that implementation of the Localism Act may be influenced by the need to protect limited resources, rather than providing choice. For example some practitioners advised that execution of this part of the Act, even if viewed as unworkable due to shortages of private rented accommodation, may potentially be treated as a weapon that could be brandished to discourage households from presenting as homeless.

The problems identified ultimately call for an injection of resources, which runs counter to the main Government drive toward reducing public spending. However, as an essential service, it is argued that ensuring statutory homelessness departments are provided with suitably qualified staff and sufficient options to stem homelessness is necessary and the provision of funding to help achieve this should not be skimmed. Furthermore, if politicians are genuinely motivated to reducing homelessness, this should relate to all forms, not just the most visible.

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