



Working for Health

Responding to homelessness

Presenter

Problems facing local authorities. To begin we hear from Abraham Ghebre-Ghiorhis, a lawyer, and David Rook, a housing officer with Brighton and Hove Council. They talk about some of the problems facing the council in responding to homelessness.

Abraham Ghebre-Ghiorhis

Well I think the, the main problem we have is, the one which is experienced by local authorities i.e. lack of resources. Over the last 15 or 20 years since the introduction of the right to buy legislation a lot of housing stock was bought by the tenants and therefore is not available for homeless persons. Secondly the attitude of society is probably changing and the support that we give to homeless persons is increasingly pursued as being a temporary measure and the general message coming from central government is that people should be in a position or should be able with some support and assistance to make their own provision in the long, a large section or a large proportion of the persons presenting themselves as homeless ah may not have that option and homelessness usually tends to co-exist with other problems, mental health problems or, or other sort of problems and because of that what used to be primarily a brick and mortar service providing accommodation is increasingly having to address the problem of support and care to the person who is accommodated and therefore housing is increasingly becoming a social issue and a care issue and therefore the health, social and housing needs just go hand in hand.

David Rook

At the moment we're just drawing up a protocol of how housing will work with social services and health and we're quite hopeful that that will bring health on board far more than at present for example it's not uncommon for a hospital social worker to phone us and advise at three in the afternoon that somebody's being discharged from hospital today, they're homeless today and they must have ground floor level access accommodation. That sort of scenario happens not infrequently and it's that sort of working relationship that really isn't helpful so we want to try and improve that communication problem but also I think there's very much a need for health to get more involved in the provision of housing and the provision of good quality housing because bad quality housing inevitably affects tenants health then impacts on the health authority so a preventative approach. We've received grants of £7 million under the rough sleepers initiative we've carried out two counts of rough sleepers one in I think it was '96 and one last summer and in the first count there were 44 rough sleeper identified the second count there was 40, I think it was 43 and the funding will provide 100 units of accommodation for rough sleepers and that's a programme that's properties have now been found we've got partner organisations we're just waiting, you know we're just in the stages of either completing on a property purchase or completing a refurbishment. And over the next few months these 100 units will come on line half of which will be supported or there will be support on site the other half will be unsupported. I'm sure we won't have any problem filling the 100 units.

Presenter

Paul is a young man currently sleeping on the streets.

Paul

The first time was a few years ago I got caught up in rent arrears so I was out on the streets then I decided to travel about a bit so I've been in and out of night shelters and hostels and then I moved to a town that I like and sometimes it can be difficult finding a place that will take me 'cause I'm under 25 and 'cause of the cuts in housing benefit and that it can be quite

difficult, I was ok. I mean I was in Plymouth before I come here and I was squatting in a flat there but I was evicted from that and then I was offered a chance to come to Brighton with a couple of people so I moved from there to here and so I've been on the streets on and off for the last what 7 months since I've been here. It can have some serious effects I mean you, you don't always get the chance to eat properly you know I mean it's okay now I'm selling the Big Issue now I can make money so I can go out and get something to eat but it's always eating out on the run and that so you know it's not easy to get a proper meal every time. You know and if you have a bad day and you don't make any money there's a couple of soup runs but it is just soup and bread and it is at like eight o'clock at night so that's it, you know sleeping out in the bad weather and that you know it's not good for you, you know you get colds quite easy you know. I did have quite a bad case of flu over the winter and that just my sleeping bags got damp when I was out one night so I had quite a really, chest infection that was pretty bad.

Presenter

Young people can be disadvantaged by the system. John Holmstrom of Brighton Housing Trust explains why.

John Holmstrom

The main reason young people have a problem is due to the single room rent. The single room rent was introduced in October 1996 by the previous government which limited the maximum level of housing benefit to the cost of a single room without any facilities such as cooking in your rooms, so it's only shared facilities. It's been set at around about £44 a week. Because of the definitions in single room rent it doesn't even cover the cost of a bedsit, a bedsit meaning a single room with cooking facilities which is the minimum standard the local authority imposes in terms of environmental health legislation. The cost of that at the moment is closer to £50 to £55 a week. Because young people have £10 a week less benefit to live on they have absolutely no resources to top up any shortfall. So landlords have effectively stopped letting to young people. For under twenty five year olds who may not be rough sleepers but are homeless and we can't assist in some ways we don't know what is happening. If they find the doors are constantly closed in their face they have to work out their own solutions. Clients are invariably very resilient and remarkably resilient and that's the one thing that I'm left with is their enduring ability to survive extremely difficult circumstances. In practice what that means is they will explore and exploit as far as much their own personal networks family friends whatever. The cases we are beginning to see now is where those networks are exhausted sleeping on somebody's floor who hasn't got proper accommodation, landlords getting unhappy about somebody living long term in family or friendship relationship under strain because of overcrowding so we're seeing those stresses and strains but ultimately we really don't know because a lot of those young people aren't in contact with anybody, and I think our concern is is there a potential time bomb there which will start hitting us where people are being turned away and there's a kind of onset of damage of all the unease of homelessness.