

Social Justice And Regeneration Committee

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Date: Wednesday 8 November 2006

Time: 9.30am - 12.30pm

Venue: Senedd, National Assembly for Wales

Policy Review: Youth Homelessness

Report For The Social Justice And Regeneration Committee

The Wallich Clifford Community has been providing support and accommodation to homeless people of all ages since 1978. It now provides these services in 11 authorities in Wales, its work falls within three main categories:

1. Residential projects in which we temporarily support people in accommodation that we also manage. These include direct access hostels, emergency night shelters and accommodation for people with specific issues such as substance misuse or mental health problems.
2. Tenancy support projects in which we support people who have tenancy difficulties. These projects support 392 people at any one time in a diverse range of projects, from preventing an imminent eviction through to helping people gain the skills needed to sustain a tenancy.
3. Prevention/intervention projects, which are a broad range of services that prevent homelessness or make life better for homeless people. Our projects designed to prevent homelessness provide advice, mediation services and bonds to gain access to private rented accommodation. Our four Rough Sleeper Intervention Teams (RSIT) continue to help the most vulnerable and chaotic homeless people on our street.

Residential Projects:

The Nightshelter in Cardiff offers accommodation on a nightly basis to rough sleepers. People accessing the Nightshelter usually have a whole range of multiple personal problems. Although it is open to all ages, approximately 25% are between 16 and 25 years old. The dominating issue is that of substance mis-use, although this is usually complicated by an additional alcohol use. The life-style is such that there are many resultant health problems that are frequently left unaddressed, partly because the problems are unacknowledged by the client and partly because the chaotic life-style militates against adapting to the mainstream health care systems. On occasion, 100% of the residents have been intravenous drug users and although they frequently express a wish for detox, such services have a waiting list and the chaotic life-style does not allow such forward planning to be realistic.

Our hostel provision in Cardiff (Sir Julian Hodge Hostel) and Swansea (Dinas Fechan) is slightly longer-term temporary accommodation, although many of the same issues are encountered. The greater stability, however, does make it possible for staff to help clients identify needs and to plan accordingly. In the hostel as in all our projects we have found it enormously helpful to have a staff team who are trained in working with active drug users and an organisational philosophy that accepts the fact of substance mis-use and that working with that fact is more likely to be successful than the zero-tolerance approach. We believe that there is a great mis-understanding of the Mis-use of Drugs Act in the sector and this prevents many organisations following the same path.

We have a number of other residential projects which specifically target particular client groups such as street drinkers, or people with a dual diagnosis i.e. mental health problems with an additional substance mis-use issue. We work in a similar manner with these clients in that we recognise the reality of their life-style and work with it rather than telling them to alter. This has led to us successfully housing many street drinkers who have long histories of failing in all types of accommodation. Although these projects have a generally older client group, it is all too easy to imagine that the current younger clients of the Nightshelter and our hostels could become part of this older client group should their needs as young people remain unaddressed.

Two projects of ours specifically target the needs of young people. We find that what works is very much based around activity, whether it is supporting people accessing training or education or providing volunteering opportunities or engaging in sports. In many ways this seems to be no more than common sense, but for many clients the experience has been of professionals such as probation officers, social workers, support workers etc. wanting to talk about their problems and getting them to address them. Our working methodology – "Solution Focused Brief Therapy" works on the assumption that the problem and the solution are not necessarily related, and that all people have strengths and resources within themselves as well as what might appear to be a dominant "problem".

Tenancy Support Projects:

These projects either help previously homeless people establish and maintain a tenancy or help prevent people who are in tenancy difficulties from losing that tenancy and becoming homeless. Many of the same issues apply in these projects, but also matters over relationships with landlords, problems over debts and relationships with neighbours. It is undoubtedly the case that to have your own tenancy is what most people aspire to, as is the wish to be part of society. Many achieve this, but there are also many who remain isolated, lonely and unhappy. Some tenancies are lost because some people would walk away from such an experience. Traditionally organisations concerned themselves with housing issues – resettlement, tenancy maintenance etc. they have increasingly moved into employment issues – training, education, key skills, etc. and it may be that increasingly they need to work with the emotional needs of people who are isolated from others.

Other Projects:

Our Rough Sleep Intervention Teams go out on to the streets in the early morning in Cardiff, Swansea, Bridgend and Newport. The aim is to use humanitarian aid, (clothing, breakfast etc) to be the means whereby contact is made so that people can be referred into the appropriate services. In

Newport we found that 11.6% of men and 32% of women were under the age of 25 years of age. (Survey 197 men and 34 women). An interpretation of this could be that women have a wider range of skills to enable them to become re-established and independent. It is important that rough sleeping is prevented and if it occurs that there is early intervention so that such a life-style does not become entrenched. Long-term rough sleepers will be in need of long-term support.

Our Bond Boards in Swansea and Bridgend are incredibly successful in re-housing people in the private sector. Relationships with landlords are well established but without the Bond Board, there would be far fewer landlords prepared to rent to homeless people. It is inevitable that the private sector is expected to play an increasingly important role in housing homeless people. Our Bridgend Bond Board report that the age-group 16 – 25 is probably the most ill-advised on housing issues. Because the majority of them have no previous housing experience, they are easily taken in by rogue landlords. The Bond Board can protect them against such exploitation.

The main causes of homelessness are usually described as family or relationship breakdown. These breakdowns occur usually after a lengthy period in which the relationships are problematic. We have established a project run by "Solutions Workers" in which anyone with any problem whatsoever, could be interviewed by a Solutions Worker who will help them to come to their own solution to their unique set of circumstances. It is evident that problems that are unrelated to managing accommodation, if unchecked, can lead to the loss of that accommodation. Relationships can breakdown because of the behaviour of one or more parties to the relationship, to unresolved debt problems, or purely to mis-understandings between people. Circumstances such as this are not resolved by housing advice alone but fall more within the counselling remit. The result could, however, be the prevention of homelessness.

Our Mediation Project in Carmarthen would similarly address relationship issues and yet have a preventative outcome.

Observations:

I have asked representatives from a range of projects to give me their thoughts for the benefit of the Committee.

The skills needed to manage accommodation and to manage personal relationships are dependent on good parenting and a stable childhood. Observing the histories of our clients, it is overwhelmingly the case that they have disrupted childhoods and poor parenting. It is unrealistic for such disadvantage to be turned round easily within a short period of time. On occasion the housing issue can be resolved with a housing solution, but this is in the minority of cases. If somebody's housing situation was to be resolved and yet their personal skills and psychological and emotional strength not be up to maintaining that accommodation they will return as a statistic in the homelessness figures, as well as remain the socially excluded and personally unfulfilled people they were before.

It is true that the earlier you can intervene when somebody is in trouble, the more likely it is to prevent a long-term problem. In stressing the importance of early intervention, (and if it falls within the heading of youth homelessness it has already gone too far) one must not forget that services

should still be provided to the people for whom life has been a long experience of disadvantage and exclusion.

If the theory of the single room rent is that it is reasonable for young people to share is accepted (and it may not be), it is the case that to live with others requires the ability and skills to manage such relationships. The evidence from client histories is that the lack of these skills is often fundamental to the reasons for their homelessness.

Sometimes the interpretation of housing legislation for young and other homeless people works to their disadvantage in that their vulnerability and their lack of necessary skills isn't taken into account. This lack of skills can have led to an eviction, which can subsequently lead to them being described as intentionally homeless. Whereas somebody who is less vulnerable may retain an unintentional assessment and receive a better service under the statutory regulations. We as an organisation believe that charities are established, and politicians enter politics, in order to make a difference to the lives of people. We suspect, however, that the legislation that the politicians pass in order to achieve this goal can be interpreted in such a way as to manipulate the "numbers" so that the local authority need do the 'statutory minimum', rather than what is the intention of charities and politicians that is to achieve the 'moral maximum' for disadvantaged and vulnerable people.

A manager of our young person's project in Llanelli (Clos Sant Paul) was asked to characterise the problems that her clients experience. She listed mental health, substance mis-use, behavioural problems, offending behaviour, anti-social behaviour and ill health. These are not unexpected. She went on to add trauma, loneliness, lack of family support, lack of life skills, low self-esteem, lack of identity, lack of confidence, low income and other people's perception of youth. These latter characteristics are fundamental to the person's identity and the focus of our work should be to change these negatives into positives. People who are confident and have high self-esteem are more likely to be the people who make successful, positive changes in their lives. This is why the Solution Focused Brief Therapy approach works, why we concentrate on practical activity as a developmental tool and why we became a City and Guilds Centre in order that we can provide clients with a Profile of Achievement which may be the first qualification they have received.

Conclusion:

The issues for young people and older people are similar. They generally are issues that relate to them as people, rather than issues that relate solely to their accommodation. The longer they remain unaddressed, the more deeply embedded they become, hence the importance of early intervention. Our experience also indicates that to be told by "professionals" that they need to sort out their problems has often proved not to work. Since the psychology of the person is all important it would make sense to build on the strengths they have within them as their solution to their circumstance.

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27 October, 2006