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COVID-19 and Homelessness: national policy at the local level

Victoria Riley, Sophia Fedorowicz, Dr Naomi Ellis, Prof Christopher Gidlow –
Centre for Health and Development (CHAD), Staffordshire University

Rachele Hine - Expert Citizens

Andy Meakin - VOICES of Stoke-on-Trent

Karen Saunders - Public Health England

Introduction

It was thought that the impact of Covid-19 would be particularly severe for people experiencing homelessness for a number of reasons:

- Prevalence of chronic conditions places an estimated 41% of the homeless population at high risk of severe and life threatening Covid-19 symptoms ^[1]
- Shared living environments (e.g., hostels, shelters) that are cramped and unclean prevent adherence to social distancing, self-isolation and hand washing ^[2]
- Poor access to health care ^[3] compounded by a health service under enormous pressure, reduced primary care capacity and pharmacy provision ^[2,4,5]
- Reduced staff/volunteers for other important support services (e.g., foodbanks) as people become ill or self-isolate.

Project Aim

- To understand the impact on, and support for, people experiencing homelessness during the pandemic, and make recommendations for immediate and post-crisis support.

Method

- Semi-structured interviews (MS Teams/telephone)
- Stakeholders/experts (locally, regionally and nationally) who work to support people experiencing homelessness, manage support services, or have knowledge of relevant regional and national policy and programmes.
- Analysed using inductive thematic analysis.

Sample

- Interviews were conducted between May-June 2020
- 32 completed telephone interviews
 - x8 Local stakeholders
 - x8 Regional stakeholders
 - x9 National stakeholders
- 5 participants interviewed locally worked directly with those experiencing homelessness (including one participant with lived experience)

Results

Six themes resulted from the analyses:

1. The effectiveness of the 'Everyone In' campaign
2. Covid19 has revealed extent of hidden homelessness
3. Lack of government funding to provide support
4. Impact of changes to service provision
5. Impact of support in emergency accommodation
6. Exit planning for the future

1. The effectiveness of the 'Everyone In' campaign

A belief that the "Everyone In" campaign was something that had to happen.

"has sort of been... I won't say a blessing, but it's sort of had a certain degree a positive outcome" (L09)

"it has taken a pandemic to house up the majority of rough sleepers...it should have been done a long time ago" (L10)

"if there's an appetite and the money then we can get everybody off the streets" (N08_regional)

1. The effectiveness of the 'Everyone In' campaign

Some customers have benefitted from the block on evictions and access to emergency accommodation.

"nobody being evicted by landlords currently means that we are seeing less families approaching us"
(N08_regional)

"people can't be evicted from hostels... I think that has been a really good thing" (L09)

"we have some people in rehab, got people moving to their own property, we have got some people who have gone into supported housing provision which we provide, so we are getting some positive rebounds as well" (L07)

1. The effectiveness of the 'Everyone In' campaign

The mortality and infection rate was less than expected

"I don't think we have actually had a confirmed case as such. Which is quite surprising I think really" (L14)

"we have been quite pleasantly surprised that... Covid has not had the sort of devastating clinical and biological impact that we were expecting" (N13)

2. Covid19 has revealed extent of hidden homelessness

COVID highlighted the extent of people experiencing homelessness

“the numbers of people who are actually homeless, i.e. sofa surfing, and things like staying with friends or family and others, you know there are literally thousands of those” (N16)

“it really flushed out those hidden homeless, people who were making their own temporary arrangements, were living in very insecure accommodation, you know, we are picking up all of those now” (L01)

“the caseload has actually quadrupled from what numbers we were dealing with prior to Covid” (L08)

“we are now aware that there was 15,000 people in England that are being accommodated through emergency hotel accommodation. Last year’s official counts for rough sleepers was 4,300” (N07)

2. Covid19 has revealed extent of hidden homelessness

Increased levels of engagement with previously hidden subgroups

“we have got a higher proportion of females than perhaps you would see nationally, which I think is a good sign, because it shows that those females are feeling a bit more safe in that setting perhaps” (L04)

“I think women are more likely to sofa surf as a rule, are more likely to end up in kind of unsafe sex for rent arrangements, or to stay with a perpetrator to avoid rough sleeping. So, I hope that it is a positive that women have felt as though they can come forward during this time, knowing that they will get accommodated” (N14)

“that’s the other positive about Covid, we have actually managed to uncover people who were homeless, that we perhaps didn’t know about before” (L04)

3. Lack of Government funding to provide support

Agreement that the funding was not enough which led to variations in the support provided

“there was that sort of initial feeling that, well maybe Government will continue to fund it, we will get everybody in, we will continue to try and get people in, but then when it was clear that there probably wasn’t going to be huge amounts of additional funding, I think that probably stalled local areas to getting more people in” (N09)

“the money we have got is certainly not sufficient to cover everything the Council has done” (L01)

“the financial investment hasn’t been enough to actually accommodate all of those people. But it was done because they were asked to do that” (N16)

3. Lack of Government funding to provide support

Essential to provide wrap around support not just a roof over the customers head

“we strongly believe people have a right to a home and actually a home isn’t just bricks and mortar, there is more to that, it is about making sure people have the right support to put them on the right path and to help them to stay on that path until they get to where they want to be” (L04)

“it is easy to get somebody a roof over their head in the grand scheme of things, what is not so easy is making sure that they have that support to maintain that” (N07)

“we need to be able to provide that relatively intensive support for some individuals. If we can’t do that, then people just won’t be able to stay in these properties” (N09)

4. Impact of changes to service provision

Telephone support was offered by many services and to facilitate this some provided customers with mobile phones

“it has had an impact in terms of how services can deliver their support. There is a lot less face to face support going on. A lot of phone support instead. I know that some services do offer a face to face appointment where absolutely necessary but in general, like my own service, it is mostly conducted through the phone now” (L11)

“most services now come to the hub and are face-to-face and we just use our PPE and social distancing, and then on the days that they can’t come, because they are not just at The Crown, they are everywhere, so they do have telephone support.” (L12)

“We issued mobile phones to customers, so we could try and promote some ongoing contact with those individuals” (L08)

“one of our housing related support services have been providing phones to this group, so that they are able to have those conversations by phone.” (N01)

4. Impact of changes to service provision

Staff adjusted to flexible working but some services cannot be delivered remotely

“because they are not doing the number of face-to-face visits and that’s reduced travel time for example, and they are doing a lot more by telephone, in some respects that has freed up some capacity and we have used that capacity to support more people.” (L04)

“We have always been face-to-face, it is not possible for us to do our job over the phone” (L12)

“a lot of the staff working from home are doing a lot of the back office admin stuff, so the front line staff are doing more than what they would normally be doing in the community, if that makes sense” (L07)

4. Impact of changes to service provision

Disruption to drug and alcohol services in particular presented challenges for customers

“I think also as well because other services and how they are working, so for example, in particular when lockdown began and some addiction services for example weren’t doing face to face, it was a real difficulty in getting people for example scripted in that period and things like that.”(L07)

“we had a few customers fall off their prescription, their drug treatment programmes due to not wanting to risk going out but there was no service to get medication delivered so that was quite difficult initially.” (L10)

5. Impact of support in emergency accommodation

Support was made available in some emergency accommodation, but not in others

“in the initial stages we had 30-40 people accommodated in some hotels with no mental health or drug and alcohol support going into those premises at all” (L03)

So we have got a multi-agency hub that operates throughout the week, so that consists of the Outreach Team being based there, which enables us to do in-depth assessments for individuals to look at exit planning for those customers.” (L08)

“Unfortunately, because we had to act very quickly, to get people into accommodation for the first couple of weeks or so, that is what wasn’t necessarily there and what we did find, was that there was about 15 people that actually lost accommodation because their behaviour was so unacceptable, the hotel wasn’t prepared to keep them there and that was because we didn’t have the support in place in the hotels but in both properties” (L01)

5. Impact of support in emergency accommodation

Support in emergency accommodation was essential and led to a drop in evictions and an increase in engagement

“in a way putting them in a hotel, accommodated for the past 12 weeks have allowed for you know a degree of engagement and organising things like, you know mental health assessments, GP registration, UC claims ... So, in a way it allows for things to happen which some of the people may and may not have been able to do.” (L09)

“I think we have seen it nationally haven’t we, and locally actually, through the hotel that hotel provision without support and done in a way without trauma informed care and approaches doesn’t work. There are high rates of abandonment, high rates of eviction etc” (L07)

“what we have seen is we have actually reduced evictions significantly from that hotel by having that support from [service] staff there to help assist the management around mitigating some of those risks of those customers with our knowledge we have got an experience of that customer group” (L08)

6. Exit planning for the future

Customers need support during the transition to the next phase and needs assessments are being carried out

"I think it is really about that transition period now and making sure that, you know, people aren't rushed out of hotels. I think there needs to be funding to make sure people can stay where they are until a suitable housing alternative can be found for them. That needs time, it needs investment and it needs a really thoughtful process about what will work for the individual."(N17)

is we are doing an accommodation and support needs assessment with all the agencies. So for all the individuals we have got housed, we are asking them to tell us (a) what sort of accommodation will they need as their next step and (b) what sort of support will they need, so we will have a good idea of where the gaps are." (L01)

6. Exit planning for the future

Uncertainty around resources, funding and long-term investment

“whether the funding will encompass that and how long for into the future, we don’t quite know” (N01)

“How can we possibly plan, you know, the best paths for all those people to access accommodation that they are going to be able to sustain and maintain, so without kind of investment in support, without investment in helping us secure accommodation.”(L02)

“And it worries me slightly that, you know come July and we are not many weeks away from that now, you know, if the leisure industry is allowed to commence again, is everyone in those hotels, are they kind of going to be shown the door.”(L02)

6. Exit planning for the future

Lack of accommodation and long-term housing options

“So you might put somebody into temporary accommodation, but then you will find them move on accommodation but because we have effectively shut down our housing allocation service, as have all of the social housing providers, we have not had any properties to move people on from temporary accommodation.”(L01)

“You know we don’t know if night shelters are going to be allowed to open again during this year. If they are not, then where is everyone going to go? We have got 50,000 people in hotels, what is going to happen at the end of July.” (N07)

“so currently we have quite a number of people that we haven’t been able to accommodate, because we are quickly running out of accommodation.”(L02)