



Housing
Executive

Homelessness Service User Journeys

Executive Summary

Research Unit
March 2021

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Background to the research

The rationale for this specific piece of homelessness research stems from a number of findings and recommendations in other policy documents, including the most recent homelessness strategies (2012-2017 and 2017-2022), the evaluation of the 2012-2017 Homelessness Strategy and the NI Audit Office (NIAO) report *Homelessness in Northern Ireland* (2017).

The 2017 Northern Ireland Audit Office report on homelessness in Northern Ireland made a number of recommendations, including that the Housing Executive needs to be more innovative in its analysis, interpretation and presentation of the homelessness data it collects.

The Housing Executive's Homelessness Policy and Strategy Unit identified a need for research to gain an understanding of service users who use or have used homeless services, looking specifically at the homelessness process and the individual's journey into, through and in some cases out of homelessness.

Objectives

The key research objectives were as follows:

1. To explore the needs and experiences of a variety of individuals/households using a 'homelessness journey approach'¹.
2. To investigate the ways in which individual situations and actions link with wider processes such as service provision, referral routes, exclusion policies, eligibility and wider legislation
3. To chronologically chart the housing situations, life experiences and service contact of individuals/households and explore the links between these spheres of their lives.
4. To identify individuals' experiences in regard to engagement with statutory and voluntary organisations and how these impact upon outcomes (including prevention of homelessness, placement sustainability and movement to permanent accommodation).
5. To identify any role that the Housing Executive, or any other statutory or voluntary organisation, could have played in preventing the homelessness at an earlier opportunity and make recommendations. These may cover areas of policy, strategy and/or operational development.

¹ For the purposes of this summary it is noted that the terminology adopted for this research study – 'homeless journey' – was based on the definition noted by CRESR (and previously used as an approach by Crisis); that a "homeless journey approach is premised on the view that homelessness and other vulnerabilities are a product of a complex series of processes, events, actions and interactions" which can combine to influence homeless people's housing and life experiences, to move them along their 'homelessness journey', and can define their housing and support needs.

Methodology

In February 2020, Fiona Boyle Associates was commissioned to undertake a research project looking at homeless service user journeys, which involved the analysis of secondary data and primary research with internal and external stakeholders, including nineteen telephone interviews with Housing Executive staff members and eleven telephone interviews with internal and external stakeholders. Homeless Service User engagement was the main focus of the research and the consultant delivered a multi-method approach, which enabled the production of a series of chronological charts of service users housing situations; life experiences and service contact, their specific and personalized homeless journey. A total of 30 service users took part in this stage of the research. Additionally six case studies were developed.

Covid-19 restrictions in the period March-October 2020, impacted the nature and approach of the primary fieldwork. Instead of planned face-to-face interviews and focus groups, these were undertaken through a mix of telephone and zoom video conferencing, together with a small number of face-to-face interviews held in line with social distancing regulations.

Key Findings (Stakeholder perspectives)

Telephone interviews were undertaken with 11 key sectoral stakeholders and a total of 19 Housing Executive staff, the majority of whom covered operational areas. Interviewees discussed a range of issues, which are summarised under six themes: the homeless journey; journeys into homelessness; identifying and understanding the needs of service users in the homeless journey; the needs of service users on a homeless journey; journeys out of homelessness and critical intervention points in the homeless journey.

The Homeless Journey

The research adopted the terminology of a *homeless journey* as a mechanism to explore and understand the needs and experiences of homeless service users with complex needs. This concept and term was explored with both sets of stakeholders.

- There was recognition among stakeholders that there was a distinction between 'first time' homeless service users and 'repeat' homeless service users.
- Whilst the majority of respondents visualised the homeless journey commencing at a point much in advance of presentation to the Housing Executive, some referred to the journey as being from when they come in, to when they are housed.
- There was recognition that considerable numbers of service users remain as hidden or concealed homeless individuals or households for a range of reasons.
- Whilst the end goal is accommodation/being rehoused there needs to be support in place to help this happen.
- The journey can be difficult on many levels. There could be quite a lot of twists and turns in the path. It can be a daunting experience, particularly if the person is experiencing it for the first time.
- The journey does not always come to a positive end. A homeless journey is entirely unique for that person's circumstances and it can range from weeks to months and years.

- The interactive nature of the journey and the service users' initial and ongoing interaction with a range of accommodation and wider support agencies was seen as critical to progression along the timeline of the journey.
- The lack of completion of some homeless journeys and the difficulties in bringing things to a successful conclusion were highlighted by respondents.
- Respondents recognised that homelessness had become an embedded way of life for a small group of people (chronic homeless); whilst for others homelessness was the result of a small number of factors (e.g. loss of job) and could potentially be resolved more easily.

Journeys into homelessness

This interview theme explored what respondents thought were the risk factors and trigger points in terms of the causal factors why individuals started on a journey into homelessness.

- There was general recognition that many of the journeys into homelessness were largely predictable (given the risk factors and trigger points visible in many lives) and more should be done to work with those at risk to both prevent initial homelessness and recurrent homelessness.
- Stakeholders suggested that the journey into homelessness is often predicated in a change in a service user's specific need or issue, including mental health issues and addictions which had changed, thus triggering their homelessness.
- Stakeholders noted that particular individuals or groups were at risk, including those with a history of the care system, those who had previous homeless experience including family homelessness and those experiencing social or family exclusion/poor family support.
- Feedback from stakeholders suggested that in many cases of ongoing homelessness, a key trigger is often a significant life event or trauma.
- Stakeholders noted that a sudden and often unexpected drop in income, due to the loss of a job or a change in family circumstances, was frequently the trigger for a homeless journey starting.
- Stakeholders noted that the start of a homeless journey was often triggered by the interplay of a number of smaller issues, rather than one large specific need or issue.

Identifying and understanding the needs of service users in the homeless journey

Stakeholders emphasised the process and tools they used to identify and understand the needs of service users they interacted with during their homeless journey. The changes to the homeless application process and interaction with the HE since the phased introduction of Housing Solutions² from 2016 onwards, was seen as particularly useful. External and internal stakeholders pointed to six key components of Housing Solutions, which they suggested had resulted in better outcomes for the service user. They were:

² Commencing in 2016 on a phased introduction, the Housing Executive has adopted a *Housing Solutions and Support* approach to dealing with any person who contacts them with a housing issue. All offices and patches were fully operational by March 2019. The Housing Executive's Housing Solutions Handbook (February 2017) explains that Housing Solutions *is a holistic approach that considers the individual circumstances, needs and aspirations of the person.*

- Continuity of relationship and continuity of service.
- Identification of needs: the Housing Solutions form was viewed as very comprehensive.
- Housing Advisors operated a regular housing clinic in specific temporary accommodation hostels.
- Specialist knowledge and expertise available where it is needed.
- Options for a short term solution: there was general agreement that Housing Solutions has enabled a better use of the referral process to temporary accommodation.
- Focus on finding a long term solution: it is about finding solutions within the HE as well as opening up the discussion with external support agencies.

The needs of service users on a homeless journey

Stakeholders noted:

- A high level of mental health needs amongst homeless service users, noting this as both a trigger to, and a factor resulting from, the homeless journey.
- The range and diversity of addictions: alcohol addiction; substance misuse and addiction ranging from prescription drugs, other substances through to IV drug use and heroin.
- Difficulties with physical health.
- Involvement in or exposure to abuse (physical, emotional, sexual, psychological) and violence.
- A recurring need in terms of low or limited finances, dependence on benefits and/or poor uptake of benefits and poor financial management skills resulting in rent arrears, debt and loss of home for financial reasons.

Journeys out of homelessness

Respondents pointed to a range of factors which in their opinion make it difficult for service users to come back out of homelessness and into settled accommodation within the community, including:

- Insufficient service intervention either before a person enters the homeless journey (prevention) or once a person is exiting the homeless journey.
- Access to mental health services: complicated referral processes, lengthy waiting lists, lack of appropriate service provision for people in different homeless situations and settings.
- Access to addiction services.
- Dual diagnosis services: the lack of options for those in need of a mental health assessment but who had an addiction.
- Dealing with past trauma: a lack of access to services including counselling was highlighted.

Critical intervention points in the homeless journey

Respondents noted:

- The need to have more intervention at community level before the breakdown of family relationships, prior to embarking on a homeless journey and coming to the Housing Executive.
- Intervention at an earlier stage for specific groupings, such as young person in care or young person in a homeless family.
- Education as a tool, on a number of levels: the opportunity to learn and develop independent living skills.
- Providing support to sort out finances.
- Preventing the revolving door of hostels and preventing the transition to chronic homelessness. Appropriate placements in temporary accommodation hostels, the current range of provision and its ability to respond to some higher level needs e.g. chronic homeless and the need to think about what factors need to be in place to prevent re-presenting.

Key Findings (Service User Perspectives)

The research began with a profile analysis of 30 service users (17 females and 13 males, ranging in age from under 18 to over 65) who were currently or previously homeless. Respondents were in a range of living situations, with some at the front end of their homeless journey, with others having moved through initial homelessness into a cycle of repeat homeless (accommodation and placement breakdowns), whilst others were in their own tenancy at the time of the research.

Reasons for homelessness

The reasons for homelessness varied across the 30 individuals, both in terms of how they verbalised them and the severity of their condition. It was clear that most people had more than one reason for their homelessness and this was firmly interconnected to their range of circumstances. A number of common factors were present. These included:

- Relationship breakdown
- Loss of accommodation: from loss of owner occupied accommodation (through mortgage default) to loss of Housing Executive and Private Rented Sector tenancies
- Domestic violence/abuse
- Refugee status
- Lack of affordable accommodation
- Combination of factors. These included severe mental health issues; addictions; being in and out of prison, as well as a chaotic lifestyle of moving between different living situations and family arrangements.

Risk factors and triggers

There was considerable variation in the range of situations highlighted by the respondents in terms of what might have initially or repeatedly been a risk factor or trigger in their homelessness. Nineteen of the 30 respondents stated they had been homeless before the current period at the time of the research, or on a number of occasions during their homeless journey. Movement in and out of homelessness, as a result of initial circumstances and then due to risk factors and triggers, was a common theme. The following was a summary of their situations and triggers:

- Half of the service users (15) said they had experienced abuse ranging from physical, emotional and sexual by partners (and ex-partners), parents, other family members and others.
- Eight service users noted that at some point on their homeless journey one or more of their children had been taken into Social Services care.
- Five participants indicated that they had been homeless as a child. Whilst 24 service users said they had not been homeless and or in care as a child, twelve of these respondents indicated fractured family relationships and/or social services involvement at some point in their childhood.

Service user responses (in depth analysis)

This section of the report provided the analysis of these homeless journeys in more detail for all 30 service users, exploring the following themes:

The homeless journey

- All but two of the thirty respondents used the term 'homeless' in relation to their current or past situation. Service users viewed it as a negative term, which described a very difficult chapter in their lives.
- Service users with experience of temporary accommodation in hostels and single lets, still said they felt homeless and that this feeling would remain until they were in their own permanent accommodation.
- There was some recognition of what some service users called 'official homelessness', referencing when they had applied to the Housing Executive.

Journeys into homelessness

- For service users falling into the category of chronic homelessness, the start of the journey had been intertwined with multiple other factors. All five of these service users identified difficulties in their early childhood and teenage years.
- Chronic homeless service users chronicled a history of abuse and violence; multiple moves/placements; severe mental health issues; time spent in prison and addictions.
- The journey into homelessness for young people appeared to fall into two categories: firstly those where there was relationship breakdown between the service user and their family and secondly where the young person had significant mental health issues; addictions; prison stays.
- Journeys into homelessness as a result of family breakdown between an adult child and their parents were often because of overcrowding in the family home or a breakdown in a marriage or partner relationship.

- For those citing financial reasons, these were directly related to loss of or reduction in income and earnings, but other themes were frequently in the background, including relationship breakdown and physical and mental health problems/addictions.

Needs identified: Experience of the Housing Executive

Service users illustrated a diverse and often very different experience in their interaction with the Housing Executive. Some service users had found their engagement with the HE to be very positive, providing an indication of the number of points they had acquired; their areas of choice and being able to name their Housing Advisor. Other service users noted a number of negative experiences.

Needs identified: support needs and service availability

Whilst service users were positive about various aspects of the service they received in hostels, there were also negative comments about hostels.

- On the positive front, service users pointed to the level and standard of service they received and the support provided by staff members.
- There was some negative feedback which centred on the other people in the hostels and the different activities and behaviours they were exposed to, which had not helped in their homeless journey.
- Service users were very positive about the assistance they received from services, including floating support services and day centres.

Journeys out of homelessness-critical intervention points

Service users reflected on different parts of their own stories and what could be done to prevent homelessness, what could be done to intervene in a homeless situation and what help should be provided to help people move on and journey out of homelessness.

Prevention

- Early intervention: a number of service users indicated that they could have done something themselves to prevent their journey into homelessness. Certain elements could have been prevented, had there been other support or resources in place. This response was largely made by those with alcohol and/or drug addictions, but also related to access to housing information for those at risk of losing their rented accommodation.
- Intervention at an earlier stage for specific groupings: service users where the reason for homelessness was family breakdown and/or young service users, suggested that family mediation may have enabled them to either stay at home or rebuild relationships within the family.

Intervention when someone is already on the homeless journey

- Service users called for more specific support including harm reduction services; mental health facilities and services and emotional support provision.
- Service users stated that moving between hostels (either voluntarily or as a result of being asked to leave and being placed elsewhere) was not a helpful model to try and resolve homelessness.

Moving on- when someone becomes temporarily or permanently rehoused

- A number of service users who had been through the process before, noted that they felt rushed and did not have sufficient time or support to set up their new accommodation.

- Service users noted that they felt the Private Rented Sector is inaccessible to people in their situation, because they have no guarantor or finances for a deposit or rent in advance.
- Service users stated that the most important thing to them was having someone who would provide regular support, who they know and could trust and who would remain with them until they were fully settled.
- Positive comments were made by service users who had journeyed out of homelessness, about statutory provision including discretionary grants as well as voluntary sector support.

Conclusions

The report concludes with a summary of findings from both internal/external stakeholder and service user feedback, along with suggestions for intervention.

- Stakeholders from both the Housing Executive and external providers made a number of key points, which related to the concept of a 'homeless journey' and what it means to a service user; the type and nature of needs that service users have; the risk factors and triggers resulting in homelessness and the initial step onto a homeless journey, together with an analysis of when and what the critical intervention points are. They also provided feedback on current services as well as looking at gaps in services and what more could be done.
- Feedback from stakeholders confirmed the complexity of the range, type and nature of risk factors, triggers and causes of the onset of a homeless journey, together with setbacks along the journey and difficulties in exiting the journey.
- Feedback from internal Housing Executive stakeholders suggested that Housing Solutions as a model and approach is working. However Housing Advisors stated they often felt pressurised with the volume of their caseload and the complexity of the issues they were dealing with.
- Stakeholder feedback concluded that, irrespective of a person's homeless journey and the full range of interventions at critical points, the lack of suitable temporary accommodation and a lack of affordable accessible permanent accommodation were dual stumbling blocks, primarily to *moving out* of the state of homelessness and subsequently to *remaining housed*.
- Feedback from service users confirmed a wide range of difficult background situations, health and social care needs and other factors that led to or resulted in the individual's homelessness. The most significant of these was the high incidence of mental health issues among the respondents.
- There were specific reasons for homelessness which related to loss of rented accommodation and financial reasons. The triggers in these cases included tenancy breakdown; NTQ; landlord selling the property and neighbour disputes.
- Information and education were seen as key tools for the prevention of homelessness.

Suggested actions

Suggestions put forward in light of the findings focus on the need for measures to (a) prevent homelessness in the first instance and (b) ensure that the homeless journey is as short as possible and that the service user can be linked with appropriate, wider services.

With the homelessness strategy in place at the time of the research due to end in 2022, it was recommended that the findings of the research should be used as part of the evidence base to inform and identify the actions needed over the life of the next strategy. Other suggestions include:

- In view of the evidence on triggers that eventually lead to homelessness, and how early they can arise in an individual's life, preventative strategies need to be embedded in wider service delivery, beyond specific housing and homelessness services.
- Prevention of homelessness should underpin the Housing Executive's own operations, by ensuring that applicants are not placed in unsuitable accommodation and identifying tenants at risk of homelessness at any early stage and seeking to help them sustain their tenancy.
- Outreach services in terms of housing advice and support need to be further bolstered to ensure that there is sufficient information and help available to people at risk of homelessness before the point of starting on a homeless journey.
- There is a need to look at initiatives that could be made available at the first point of contact, which stakeholder and service user feedback indicated to be a critical point in the journey.
- As part of thinking about the first point of contact, the Housing Executive should review the applicability of other models of delivery including homeless hubs and a case manager model as used in English local authorities, where all of the service user's needs are identified and responded to in a holistic way.
- While mental health problems were the biggest identified underlying issue for the service users, followed by addictions, neither of these terms are recognised within the official reasons for homelessness recorded by the Housing Executive. The Homelessness strategy should include mechanisms to plan service delivery in the areas of mental health and addictions for those who are homeless.
- Stakeholders and service users alike noted the need for ongoing and appropriate support at the point of *exit* from homelessness, if the goal was tenancy sustainment. It is recommended that this is an integral part of the Homelessness strategy, ensuring both a reduction in repeat presenters and also a reduction of the negative impact of long-term homelessness. In addition, more focus should be placed on how best to ensure and assist a service user to be tenancy ready.
- As part of the next 5-year Homelessness strategy, more focussed work should be undertaken to provide specialist hostels for specific groups; for example, in this research – young homeless people, chronic homeless people and those with IV drug/poly drug use – with specialist staff who understand the needs of these specific client groups and can develop and target appropriate services.
- Given that access to social rented and private rented accommodation for those reliant on welfare benefits with no or limited finances to pay for deposits or rent in advance, or with no guarantor, remains a significant barrier, there is a need for high-level changes to address structural barriers to accessing affordable mainstream accommodation.
- The Housing Executive should look at its Housing Solutions approach for repeat presenters, potentially having a different response mechanism via the red flag of someone coming back repeatedly, which would indicate that there is an underlying factor that needs to be resolved before tenancy sustainment will be possible.

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