



LOCAL HOMELESSNESS STRATEGIES AND OLDER PEOPLE

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent times older homeless people have become the forgotten homeless and a low priority for policy makers and service providers. Often older people do not make the same demands on services compared with younger people and so are easier to ignore. They often have a complex combination of problems or issues that many mainstream services are too rigid to cater for. In addition, many older people often feel alienated from services or feel too proud or independent to use them. These barriers are aggravated by a commonly held view that older homeless people are too entrenched in their situation to be helped or that offering assistance is a waste of time and resources. However, there is strong evidence showing that a lot more could be done to assist older people who have been homeless over a long period and more importantly to prevent them becoming homeless in the first place.

The UK Coalition on Older Homeless believes that older people have specific needs that require a distinct approach in the development of homelessness strategies. It argues that authorities need to support and encourage specialist services that proactively target older people if they are going to successfully tackle the problem. This briefing paper gives a basic overview of some of the main elements we believe local authorities need to consider in making homelessness strategies relevant to older people.

As well as this briefing there is a great deal of information available that can help authorities make homelessness strategies work for older people. Help the Aged has worked with the UK Coalition on Older Homelessness to set up a website providing detailed examples of the kind of services that authorities may wish to develop or fund. The website can be found at: www.olderhomelessness.org.uk.

2. OVERVIEW

We believe authorities should review the supported housing options available to older homeless people and consider the following areas in developing homelessness strategies that are relevant to them:

- **Advice and advocacy services**

Improving the delivery of advice and advocacy by:

- *taking proactive steps to deliver advice services to vulnerable older people*
- *ensuring all housing advice services are accessible to older people*
- *linking into and forming partnerships with homelessness services*
- *developing mechanisms for early intervention to prevent older homelessness*

- **Outreach services**

Offering specialist outreach services that:

- *take a long term approach to older clients*
- *build up the trust and confidence of older clients*

- *deploy specialist workers who understand older peoples issues*
- *accurately identify and assess age related issues*
- *facilitate access to the right services & housing options*

- **Resettlement and tenancy sustainment**

Resettlement and tenancy sustainment services that:

- *recognise the need for long term support and continuity*
- *acknowledge the role of day centres in offering ongoing support*
- *facilitate the development of meaningful occupation schemes*
- *provide a sensitive and accurate assessment of the needs of older people*
- *deliver the right package of care and support for older people*

- **The role of day centres**

Authorities need to consider:

- *the role of homelessness day centres for vulnerable older people*
- *resourcing and encouraging day time services for older people*
- *working in partnership with day centres to deliver specialist services*
- *locating and delivering some mainstream services through day centres*

- **Primary health care**

Local authorities need to work with health authorities to:

- *improve access to health care services for older homeless people*
- *develop and improve hospital discharge policies*

- **Mental health services**

Many older homeless people experience mental health problems — local authorities need to ensure:

- *assessments of older rough sleepers by qualified mental health workers*
- *mental health services support older people living in hostel accommodation*

- **Drug and alcohol services**

Authorities should:

- *develop and extend drug and alcohol services to older homeless people*
- *offer counselling services and day time activities*
- *ensure a flexible approach to funding schemes for multiple needs*
- *develop and extend schemes that do not require abstinence as a condition of use*

- **Supported housing**

Authorities should:

- *review supported housing options for older homeless people*
- *examine the use of sheltered housing schemes*
- *deliver appropriate housing and care packages*
- *ensure the availability of long term support*

- **Community Care**

Authorities need to:

- *explore flexible funding models*
- *develop new approaches to assessments*

3. MAIN THEMES

3. 1. ADVICE AND ADVOCACY SERVICES — PREVENTING OLDER HOMELESSNESS

Many vulnerable older people only obtain advice and assistance once their situation reaches a crisis point. Advice and advocacy services have an obvious role in preventing homelessness by helping older people access the right services at the right time. However, the challenge for local authorities is to ensure that these services are delivered effectively to vulnerable and isolated older people who are often difficult to reach and do not seek help with their problems.

There is some evidence that all older people are generally reluctant to use housing advice services and are more likely to turn to friends, relatives or carers for advice. Many older homeless people are generally reluctant to use any mainstream services including housing advice. There is a perception by many older people that housing advice services are primarily designed for the young. Some groups of vulnerable older people (such as private tenants) are particularly unlikely to make contact with advice and advocacy services.

Authorities need to consider how they can actively promote advice and advocacy services to vulnerable older people and take practical steps to give older homeless people the same access to services as other client groups. Actions could include taking advice services out to older homeless people through specialist peripatetic advice services that visit day centres, hostels and other key locations. However, passively providing advice sessions in a local day centre, for example, would not be sufficient in itself. Advice services need to explore different ways of engaging with older people to gain their trust and confidence.

Vulnerable older people who are housed may be threatened with homelessness for a variety of reasons. These may include benefit problems, rent arrears, or personal crisis (e.g. ill health or losing a job). Authorities need to consider mechanisms to identify when vulnerable older people are experiencing problems, that may lead to homelessness, to allow appropriate intervention at the earliest possible opportunity. For example, authorities

could examine IT systems that flag up when an older tenant is accruing rent arrears. This would ideally trigger the offer of suitable advice and support before the situation worsens and threatens eviction. Again this generally requires direct contact rather than a reliance on written correspondence. More broadly housing providers should review their procedures for dealing with rent arrears for vulnerable older people to fully recognise the problems and difficulties they encounter

Local authorities should work in partnership with independent advice services to develop a local housing advice strategy for older people. Further to this the funding of independent advice services could be made conditional on evidence of steps to improve take up by vulnerable older people. Local authorities should automatically maintain contact with older homeless people who they have resettled to ensure they have ongoing access to and contact with advice and support services.

3. 2. OUTREACH SERVICES — BEING PROACTIVE

Older homeless people sleeping rough often feel distrustful or alienated from mainstream services. This may be because of negative experiences, intimidation by younger service users, or because they feel they have been let down by these services in the past. Others may lack the confidence or self-esteem to use services and may feel they are undeserving of the support that is available. Some have serious mental health problems and are not aware of their situation or needs.

Specialist outreach workers have an important role in gaining and rebuilding the trust and confidence of older people and in putting them in contact with the right services. Specially trained workers are able to identify and assess the specific problems encountered by older people and can begin to address some of the more complex problems needed to help them off the streets.

Given the nature of the problems experienced by older rough sleepers, dedicated workers may need to help them over longer periods of time compared with many younger clients. Authorities need to reflect this in the way in which services are funded, monitored and evaluated. As well as older people sleeping rough local authorities need to consider the benefits of dedicated outreach services for older people hidden away or trapped in poor temporary accommodation. Outreach services may also play a valuable role in highlighting gaps in local service provision.

3.3. RESETTLEMENT AND TENANCY SUSTAINMENT — BREAKING THE CYCLE

After resettlement many older homeless people find themselves living in isolation and poverty and in reality have many of the same problems as rough sleepers (e.g. poor diet, lack of heating, isolation and prejudice). These factors greatly increase the likelihood that their tenancies will fail and that they will find themselves back on the streets or trapped in the hostel system.

Good resettlement services are critical to helping older homeless people secure and maintain appropriate accommodation in the community. Older people need specialist help in finding the right accommodation combined with care and support packages tailored to their individual needs. This necessitates resettlement or tenancy sustainment officers who understand the housing needs of older people and who are able to carry out sensitive and

accurate assessments of their needs. It is vital that tenancies are in a satisfactory condition, with utilities that work, before they are let to older homeless people. Older people should be given assistance with reviewing housing benefit claims and should not be harassed or threatened with eviction when there are problems in processing claims.

During the resettlement process many older homeless people will require ongoing support and will continue to rely on homelessness services. Local authorities need to recognise this and reflect it in the allocation of funding for these services. In addition to the ongoing role of homelessness services, there is some evidence that effective resettlement can be enhanced by structured daytime activities or meaningful occupation schemes (including voluntary work). At present the majority of these schemes are directed at younger people.

3.4. ROLE OF DAY CENTRES — LOCATING SERVICES

Homelessness day centres provide an important resource for many older people who are homeless or who are living in isolation or poverty after resettlement. Day centres traditionally provide food, clothing, health care and advice and advocacy and may also offer a range of more specialist services (often in partnership with mainstream agencies). Some day centres offer resettlement support and are able to provide clients with ongoing support and help them to maintain links with other services.

Day centres can provide a good venue for services specifically directed at older people. These may include mental health service, drug and alcohol services, accident prevention, home visits, advice about avoiding colds, flu and hypothermia, and support after leaving hospital. They may also help some older people to remain in independent accommodation who would otherwise need residential care. Day centres providing a range of services can take a more holistic approach to the needs of homeless older clients. They can also offer a continuity of support and contact, which is often highly valued by older homeless people.

Local authorities need to recognise that both rough sleepers and rehoused ex-homeless older people use day centres because, for a variety of reasons, they do not feel comfortable with using mainstream services. The demands made on day centre services by older people should be reflected in the level of funding and support offered to them. Homelessness services used by older people should form part of an authorities broader strategy on services for all older people in their area. Authorities need to make their services more accessible to older homeless people but at the same time need to acknowledge the choices made by service users and reflect this in the allocation of resources.

3.5. PRIMARY HEALTH CARE SERVICES — LINKED UP SERVICES

Older people are often unwilling to use primary health care services because they feel that they will be dealt with unsympathetically. Local authorities need to work in partnership with primary health care services to ensure that their services are as accessible as possible to older homeless people. They should also consider proactive methods of service delivery by working in partnership with homelessness services. Authorities also need to review with health care services that they are operating effective discharge policies so that older homeless people do not find themselves on the streets or left in inappropriate accommodation after leaving hospital.

3.6. MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES — EXTENDING SUPPORT

Many older homeless people with mental health problems have difficulties in making contact with mental health services. Mental health assessments for older rough sleepers need to be actively carried out by qualified mental health workers. In addition more needs to be done to ensure that mental health workers are involved in care planning and support for mentally ill older people living in hostels.

3.7. DRUG AND ALCOHOL SERVICES — A FLEXIBLE RESPONSE

There is a serious deficiency in the availability of drug and alcohol services available to homelessness people. There is also a lack of services that accept older people may choose to continue drinking. Rather than placing the emphasis on schemes requiring abstinence authorities need to consider more schemes that focus on helping older people to manage their drinking and support their health care needs.

Older homeless people with a combination of problems, including drug or alcohol and mental health problems, have particular difficulties in accessing appropriate services. Authorities need to examine how existing services can be made more accessible through encouraging partnership between services through mixed funding arrangements. There should be better links between mental health and drug and alcohol services to ensure that older homeless people do not find themselves excluded from help.

Older people experiencing alcohol problems often need emotional support including access to counselling services. Older people may find themselves trapped in a cycle of depression and alcohol use and often need help with the emotional impact of events, such as the death of a partner or relative. It is also important to offer social and leisure activities as a way of helping older people to move away from alcohol problems. Authorities need to support schemes that recognise that older people may continue to drink and so aim to help stabilise drinking patterns and to offer appropriate health care and support.

3.8. SUPPORTED HOUSING — PROVIDING OPTIONS AND ASSESSING NEEDS

Many older homeless people are spending long periods in poor and inappropriate temporary accommodation because of a lack of move-on accommodation. Authorities need to examine the range of supported housing options available to older homeless people based on their medium and long-term needs. As part of this they should consult with older homeless people themselves about the design and development of new schemes. Authorities need to recognise that older homeless people may find mainstream housing options for older people unacceptable. For example, some older homeless people may find residential care unacceptable because of a reduction in benefits or because it cuts them off people with similar experiences to themselves. It is important that resettlement workers and housing providers make an accurate assessment of individual need to ensure older people are allocated to the most appropriate schemes.

Suitable housing schemes need to strike the right balance between offering independence and support tailored to the needs of the individual. In considering the options local authorities should consider the use of sheltered housing for older homeless people who

may wish to live in a communal setting but who want to retain their independence. Extra-sheltered schemes may be particularly suitable for older homeless people with higher support needs as a result of alcohol and mental health issues. Providers need to recognise the specific issues presented by some older homeless people and provide properly trained specialist support staff who can respond appropriately. Local authorities generally need to consider the delivery of individually tailored long term care and support that allows older homeless people to sustain their accommodation as independently as possible. In some cases it needs to be recognised that many frail and vulnerable older homeless people will need care and support for the rest of their lives.

3.9. COMMUNITY CARE SERVICES — GUARANTEED ACCESS

Older homeless people often have problems in accessing community care services despite having clearly established care and support needs. This is particularly true for older people under 65. It is even more difficult for people with a combination of drug and alcohol or mental health problems to access services due to the way in which support services are funded. Older homeless people, including those who have multiple needs, must have guaranteed access to community care services. Older homeless people often have difficulty in engaging with the assessment process required for them to qualify for support. Given this, authorities need to consider more effective way of delivering community care assessments, for example contracting expert voluntary agencies to participate in the assessment process.

4. CONCLUSION — ROLE OF SPECIALIST SERVICES

Current research highlights the effectiveness of developing targeted specialist services for older homeless people within an overall homelessness strategy. It argues that these services need to feature a long-term approach designed to engage with and build up the trust and confidence of the older people who have been badly failed in the past. Authorities can facilitate this by designating a lead officer to co-ordinate initiatives focusing on older homelessness people and to champion a different approach to that applied to younger people.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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