

Fit for Purpose? Official Measures of Homelessness in the Era of the Activist State

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Abstract

Since 1997 New Labour administrations have seen homelessness as a manifestation of social exclusion. Initially, ministerial attention focused on curbing street homelessness, exemplified most prominently by the Rough Sleepers Initiative. Subsequently, since 2003, the focus of the policy has widened to the promotion of a more pro-active, preventative approach in local authorities' homelessness work. This fits with the 'activist state' approach which underlies much of New Labour's social policy. Similarly, both phases of policy have been framed in terms of tightly defined statistical targets and timescales.

While the definition and quantification of homelessness has been the subject of perennial interest, the commitment to homelessness *prevention* has introduced an important new angle to the debate. The significance of this issue is apparent from the fact that since the introduction of a new generation of prevention activity, official homelessness figures have fallen sharply. While the focus on prevention, rather than crisis response, is welcomed, this shift calls for robust mechanisms to monitor the effectiveness of the mechanisms concerned.

Drawing on recently completed research this article demonstrates weaknesses in current methods for enumerating homelessness, both in understanding the true scale of the problem, and in monitoring the extent to which 'prevention activities' help to solve housing problems as opposed to impeding applicants' chances of securing a social rented tenancy. Whilst Central Government has now introduced a statistical measure aimed at quantifying effective homelessness prevention activity the slipperiness of the whole concept raises questions as to practicality of this exercise and the value of the data to be generated.

Keywords: homelessness, housing need, social statistics, evaluation

Introduction

In Britain, as elsewhere in Europe, official policy since the mid-1990s has tended to prioritise ‘relieving social exclusion’ rather than tackling poverty through progressively redistributing wealth (Lister, 1998; Powell, 2000; Levitas, 2005). Social policies emerging within this framework have emphasised the need to ‘reach out’ to excluded groups, arguing that exclusion from mainstream society is a problem in its own right. In the UK this era has coincided with the post-1997 New Labour administrations which have seen homelessness as a key manifestation of social exclusion.

The relief of homelessness has been explicitly recognised as a state responsibility in the UK since the 1977 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act. Unusually in the international context, this statute obliges the state (through local authorities – LAs) to assume legal responsibility for rehousing homeless households in certain defined circumstances. The concepts and definitions incorporated within this framework have formed the basis for official monitoring of homelessness statistics ever since.

Official homelessness policy since 1997 in England (and, to a lesser extent, in Scotland and Wales)¹ can be seen as falling into two phases. During the first, from 1997 to 2001, ministerial attention was focused primarily on the most extreme form of homelessness; that is, people ‘sleeping rough’ on city streets. The government’s Rough Sleepers Initiative (RSI) was a funded programme aimed at curbing this phenomenon (Randall & Brown, 1999; Fitzpatrick & Jones, 2005). Subsequently, since 2003, government efforts to control and reduce homelessness have widened to target the much larger numbers of people applying to local authorities for housing on the grounds that they are, or soon will be, without accommodation (DTLR, 2003). The stress on pro-active and ‘early intervention’ approaches is characteristic of the ‘activist state’ ethic embodied more widely through New Labour social policy thinking (Somerville & Sprigings, 2005).

¹ Note that, under the UK Devolution settlement of 1999, homelessness policy in Scotland and Wales falls under the formal jurisdiction of the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly.

In keeping with the familiar New Labour approach to social policy both the RSI and the broader homelessness prevention programmes have been framed in terms of tightly defined statistical targets and timescales. Hence, the relevance of the subject from the Radical Statistics perspective. Homelessness is anyway a subject of perennial academic interest in terms of its definition and quantification, partly because of its perceived status as an unusual but important example of 'housing rights'. There is a substantial literature on the merits and implicit messages inherent in definitions of homelessness and the statistics to which these give rise (see, for example, Lidstone (1994), Neale (1997), Widdowfield (1998)). Much of the critique of official homelessness statistics developed by these authors remains valid and we summarise some of the key issues below. However, New Labour's stated commitment to *homelessness prevention* has introduced a new angle to the debate. The significance of this issue is apparent from the fact that under the post-2003 policy push, officially recorded homelessness in England has fallen by over 40 per cent in only two and a half years. The number of LA homelessness 'assessment decisions' fell from 79,710 in Q3 2003 to 49,500 in Q1 2006 (DCLG, 2006a).

This reduction in 'official homelessness' is not easily explicable by any underlying social or economic trend such as sharply falling unemployment. Indeed, it has coincided with the on-going worsening of housing affordability (as average house prices have continued to rise ahead of average incomes). Hence, there appears to be a strong basis for the hypothesis that administrative action (i.e. 'homelessness prevention' services) has been the major causal factor involved here. Important questions arise as to whether such interventions actually resolve the accommodation problems of service users as opposed to administratively impeding their access to social housing and/or excluding them from official homelessness statistics. This could mean that the problem is being re-defined rather than resolved.

Drawing on recently completed research for the Department for Communities & Local Government (DCLG; formerly Office of the Deputy Prime Minister – ODPM), this paper recounts the development of homelessness prevention work and reflects on how such initiatives can be measured and evaluated. The research was largely based on 10 local authority case studies – selection weighted towards authorities believed to be relatively active in this

field as opposed to strictly representative of all English LAs. Further methodological details are described in Pawson et al (forthcoming, 2007). Reference is also made to ongoing work on this subject in Scotland.

This paper begins by rehearsing the debate around the definition of homelessness and how it is currently recorded in the UK. It moves on to discuss homelessness prevention activities and the way 'prevention' has been promoted within New Labour policy. It concludes by critically assessing the current mechanisms for measuring homelessness and assessing whether they can effectively measure the impact of prevention interventions. The DCLG study centred on homelessness prevention in England, where strategies and activities are most developed. While the English experience is the focus of this paper, where relevant, we have also highlighted key differences in Scotland, where homelessness is a devolved responsibility.

Defining and Measuring Homelessness

Developing a critique of homelessness *prevention* measurement requires that we first consider how homelessness itself is enumerated. Importantly, it must be recognised that there are linkages between how we *define* homelessness and how we *quantify* it. Whilst a 'commonsense' view sees 'homelessness' equating with 'rooflessness', most academic and other commentators would see this as excessively restrictive. Many have argued for the concept to be understood as a range of situations, from sleeping on the streets, at one end, to inadequate and insecure housing, at the other. For example, Chamberlain and Mackenzie (1992) refer to three 'tiers of homelessness':

- primary homelessness – actual rooflessness
- secondary homelessness – people living in temporary accommodation including emergency and refuge facilities, those living temporarily with others or in boarding houses
- tertiary homelessness – people living in private boarding houses on a long term basis without security of tenure or exclusive use of a bathroom and kitchen.

Whilst such a concept is not without potential flaws, its form facilitates operationalisation in the context of a population census (Flatau et al, 2006). Hence, in Australia – the origin of the framework – the census has a central role in estimating ‘snapshot’ homelessness and analysing the characteristics of those affected.

Similarly, the importance of ‘hidden homelessness’ has been widely stressed (Kenway & Palmer, 2003; Smith, 2003, 2005). At the same time, however, it is persuasively argued that such a concept can stretch the term ‘homelessness’ to such an extent that it loses all value as something distinct from the broader concept of ‘housing need’ (Neale, 1997; Fitzpatrick, 1998). Because of the elastic or ill-defined way that the term is used some have even questioned whether it is a useful concept at all (see, for example, Watson, 1984; Nord & Luloff, 1995; Heintjes, 2005).

In any case, whilst academics may define homelessness broadly for research purposes, organisations legally charged with assisting homeless people inevitably favour a definition narrower in scope. Thus how homelessness is defined is no ‘academic exercise’ but a ‘political process which reflects both value judgements ... and more material considerations in terms of the level of resources available to deal with the problem’ (Widdowfield, 1998:18). With this debate in mind, we turn to the UK context which is the focus of this paper. The UK is unique internationally in that homelessness is a legally specified term which confers enforceable rights. Elsewhere in Europe, for example, the dominant approach reflects ‘an attitude that homelessness belongs in the sphere of charity rather than entitlement’ (Fitzpatrick, 1998:212).

There are two separate ‘official systems’ for measuring homelessness in the UK. First, there are ‘rough sleeper’ counts. These are conducted by LAs in partnership with local homeless agencies and provide a snapshot of the number of people sleeping rough in a given geographical area on a single night. In addition, there are occasional more highly resourced surveys of the rough sleeper population (e.g. as part of the decennial census). Some of the issues arising from rough sleeper enumeration methodologies are discussed below in relation to assessing the success of the Rough Sleepers Initiative.

Homelessness, more broadly defined, is routinely measured by local authorities in connection with the exercise of their legal duties to

people seeking help with housing. Once an authority has determined that there is 'reason to believe' that a person seeking housing assistance may be 'homeless or threatened with homelessness' it has a statutory obligation to assess the household's circumstances in terms of four tests:

- homelessness (legal access to accommodation)
- intentionality (whether any state of homelessness results from the household's avoidable actions)
- priority need (whether the household contains children, a pregnant woman or a vulnerable individual), and
- local connection.

Only households judged unintentionally homeless and in priority need are 'accepted' as the authority's legal responsibility in terms of 'securing rehousing' (usually interpreted as being granted a tenancy in a council (or housing association) property). Hence, in England at least, the usually cited 'headline measure' of homelessness is the annual throughput of 'homelessness acceptances'².

As part of the process described above, LAs are obliged to record 'assessment decisions' and statistics on these – together with 'acceptances' – are submitted to Central Government and published on a periodic basis (quarterly in England). Under the English system the number of 'assessment decisions' is the best proxy for overall 'expressed demand' from homeless people, yet such statistics are far from ideal for this purpose. Firstly, the system records only those who have initiated the assessment process by seeking local authority assistance. Not everyone facing the loss of accommodation necessarily seeks such help. This might reflect an awareness that, as a single person or childless couple, they will probably be defined as a 'non-priority' case with the LA, therefore, having no legal duty to house them. Equally, as noted by Widdowfield (1998) some will be reluctant to experience the

² Another key statistic recorded under the official framework and often cited in the media concerns the number of placements in short term housing. This relates to the local authority duty to provide 'temporary accommodation' (e.g. B&B hotel rooms) for roofless households under assessment, and for those already accepted as homeless and in priority need and in the queue for permanent housing.

humiliation of a homelessness application. Secondly, the legislation gives considerable discretion to LAs in interpreting who should be formally assessed. Only if the authority considers there is ‘reason to believe’ that the household *may be* homeless or threatened with homelessness is it legally obliged to initiate the formal process (see discussion of ‘housing options’ procedures below).

Table 1 – ‘Homelessness Incidence’ Statistics Recorded by Local Authorities in England and Scotland, 1997-2005

	England		Scotland***
	Assessment decisions*	Acceptances**	Applications by households claiming ‘homelessness’
1997	242,340	102,000	43,135
1998	245,350	104,630	45,723
1999	243,290	105,370	46,023
2000	247,190	111,340	45,004
2001	255,080	117,830	47,493
2002	269,330	123,840	51,999
2003	296,970	135,590	56,523
2004	281,460	127,760	57,454
2005	227,260	100,170	59,970
2006**			
**	187,520	83,120	

** with respect to households seeking help with housing on the grounds of homelessness ** households ‘accepted’ by local authorities as unintentionally homeless and in priority need.*** Financial year figures ***annual totals projected on the basis of first quarter figures*

Sources: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1156302> and <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/14844/stats> - accessed 28/10/06

Separate statutory homelessness statistics are collected in England, Wales and Scotland. At least on the face of it, the Scottish system is distinctly different in that it requires LAs to record all 'homelessness applications'³. In line with this, applications, rather than acceptances, are traditionally presented as the headline measure of homelessness. Scottish LAs are also required to collect and record a significant body of data in relation to each recorded *applicant*, not only with respect to those 'accepted as homeless and in priority need' as in England⁴. The scale of 'homelessness' as measured by these systems is vastly greater than that encompassed by rough sleeper monitoring – as illustrated by setting the figures in Table 1 against the 459 people were enumerated as sleeping rough in England in June 2005 (of which 133 were logged in the City of Westminster) (DCLG, 2006b).

It would appear that Scottish LAs record 'expressed homelessness demand' more comprehensively than their English counterparts. It is certainly the case that some LAs in Scotland attempt to record as an 'application' every household making a housing enquiry and claiming 'homelessness'. Legally speaking, however, LAs in Scotland are bound by the same obligation as south of the border in that they must undertake a formal assessment only where they have reason to believe that a household may be homeless or threatened with homelessness. Recent research by the authors has confirmed that, in practice, some Scottish LAs record as 'applications' only those cases passing through an initial 'reason to believe' filter. Hence, the definition of 'homelessness application' looks distinctly weak.

Trends in homelessness acceptances (England) and applications (Scotland) are significant not only in tending to form the focus of public debate on the issue, but have also been used (or proposed for use) within official resource allocation formulae. One example concerns the planned new framework for distributing government

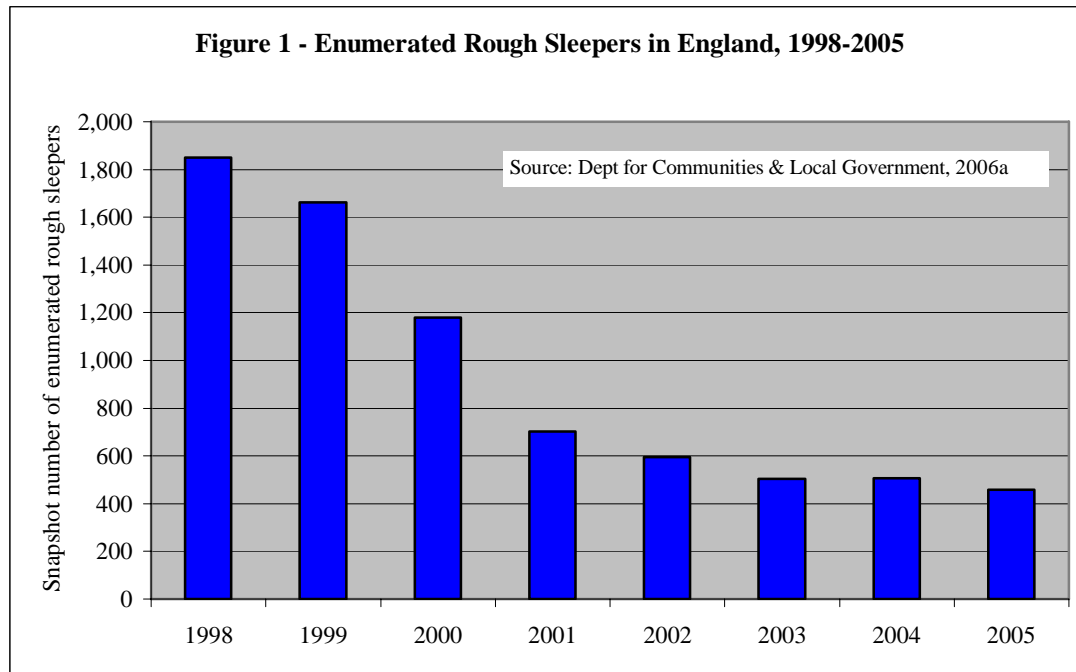
³ Similarly, prior to 1997, English local authorities were required to record 'homelessness enquiries' (Widdowfield, 1998).

⁴ Such data includes information about the household's previous housing circumstances, their ethnic origin, and their main immediate reason for homelessness. Detailed official homelessness data for England and Scotland can be accessed at: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1156302> (England) and <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/14844/1762> (Scotland)

funding for the construction of new social housing in Scotland (see paras 49-50 in Communities Scotland, 2006). It would be assumed that such systems provide LAs with an incentive to maximise the numbers of households captured under their homelessness monitoring systems.

New Labour Homelessness Policy – Phase 1: The Rough Sleepers Initiative

Under the Government's RSI programme, re-launched in 1998, a target was set to reduce rough sleeper numbers in England by two thirds of the 1998 level by 2001. This was to be achieved through a national strategy involving the development of more hostel bedspaces and housing association tenancies as well as new geographically focused outreach work and expanded resettlement support (Rough Sleepers Unit, 1999). As noted by Fitzpatrick and Jones (2005) the strategy emphasized both the responsibilities of homeless people and the 'assertive' approach required of outreach and other homelessness service provider agencies. Subsequent evaluations judged the outreach approaches to have been successful (Randall and Brown, 1999, 2002). In particular, the numerical rough sleeper reduction target was reportedly achieved ahead of the target date (DTLR, 2002). Since 2001 official policy has sought to maintain the reduced rate of rough sleeping. As shown in Figure 1 this, too, appears to have been successful.



The ‘success’ of the parallel RSI programme in Scotland is more difficult to assess, since the target set by Scottish ministers in 1999 was that no-one should *need to sleep out* by 2003 (Fitzpatrick et al, 2005). Nevertheless, rough sleeper counts suggested a 2001-2003 reduction of a third in those enumerated as having slept out within the previous seven days (George Street Research, 2003).

Achievement of numerical targets have been widely utilised to publicise the ‘success’ of RSI both north and south of the border. This has evoked headlines such as ‘Rough Sleeping Target Met!’ (Homeless Link, 2001) and ‘Rough Sleeping Drops to New Low’ (BBC, 2005). Yet such headlines illustrate ‘the long-term conundrum in social science’: while statistical information is presented as ‘fact’, enumeration can be ‘used and abused to support or challenge a particular discourse’ (Cloke et al, 2001:260).

Perceived flaws in rough sleeper monitoring have been identified both by academic analysts (e.g. Cloke et al, 2001; Williams & Cheal, 2002) and homelessness campaign groups (see, for example: Waugh, 2001; Branigan, 2001). The most fundamental issue is the simple fact that the level of resources likely to be available for such counts is always liable to be insufficient to achieve thorough coverage (Fitzpatrick et al, 2005). In addition, enumerators may tend to avoid dangerous or inaccessible locations, resulting in some of those concerned remaining uncounted. This is compounded by

the fact that homeless people generally have no settled address and are likely to seek to conceal themselves for safety reasons as well as in an attempt to remain relatively warm and dry (Fitzpatrick et al, 2005). Finally, the homeless population is not static. People will naturally move in and out of homelessness. Single night counts play down the fact that some people sleep rough for relatively short periods, moving between the streets and temporary accommodation; in other words they understate the throughput of people who sleep rough for one or more nights during a given period (see earlier discussion on the potential value of survey data). On the other hand, however, surveys which attempt to enumerate through the collection of returns from agencies risk the possibility of double counting (e.g. where a hostel and day centre each used by a homeless person each independently record that person as having slept rough).

In practice, there is no single approved approach to rough sleeper enumeration. However, official surveys of this population usually involve efforts to address at least some of the issues outlined above. In preparation for the 2001 UK Census, for example, there was extensive consultation with local authorities and homelessness charities as to the sites in each locality believed to be frequented by people sleeping out. These areas were then targeted by enumerators on census night. Similarly, in their study on rough sleeping in Scotland, George Street Research worked through local authorities and homelessness projects. Acting on GSR's behalf, these agencies recorded people as rough sleepers where they had 'slept outside in a place not specifically designed for human habitation, at least once in the last seven days' (Laird *et al*, 2004). In developing this model, GSR drew on US experience derived from the 1996 national survey of homelessness (Burt, 2001). However, as has been observed, the aims of this exercise were framed by the Scottish Executive's target on rough sleeping (see above). Hence, it was not designed as a general survey of people sleeping rough. Rather it aimed to '...assess the need to sleep rough in Scotland (by comparing the number of rough sleepers with the supply of emergency accommodation available to them)' (Fitzpatrick et al, 2005 p20).

Problems attaching to 'headcount' surveys are not unique to homelessness. For example, Smith & Mason (2006) identified similar problems relating to 'counting' Gypsies and Traveller

populations. Official counts were thought to significantly undercount the actual population, being overly influenced by the location of official sites.

A separate issue is whether a genuine reduction in street sleeping reflects entirely positive outcomes for potential rough sleepers – i.e. interventions which ‘divert’ those at risk into settled and suitable housing. For example, if the recorded trend simply masked increased placements in overcrowded or unsafe homeless hostels there would be serious questions as to whether this could be properly considered a ‘policy success’. Notwithstanding the possible validity of such concerns, however, respected academic commentators have judged RSI to have been broadly successful in terms of its stated aims (Fitzpatrick & Jones, 2005; Fitzpatrick et al, 2005).

New Labour Homelessness Policy – Phase 2: Local Authority Homelessness Prevention

Key here is new legislation requiring local authorities to draw up prevention-focused homelessness strategies (Housing (Scotland) Act 2001; Homelessness Act 2002). The first round of strategies came into effect in 2003, alongside substantial central funding to facilitate the delivery of prevention activities (Pawson et al, forthcoming 2007). A prevention-centred approach is not an easy option for LAs. It calls for a more staff-intensive and approach than that traditionally employed. It also requires a change in the traditional culture of homelessness work where staff adopt a more pro-active, problem-solving style than was previously the norm.

As might be expected, homelessness *prevention* is often alluded to without being clearly defined. However, one official definition is ‘those activities that enable a household to remain in their current home, where appropriate, or that provide options to enable a planned and timely move and help to sustain independent living’ (ODPM, 2003, para 39).

The most problematic aspect of defining homelessness prevention is that, like homelessness itself, the term can cover various forms of interventions and can take place in a range of circumstances. The Welsh Assembly Government (2004, p4) has developed a working definition of homelessness prevention that recognises that

‘prevention can take many forms and services intervene at different stages’. Accordingly, prevention is described as referring both to the prevention of *primary* homelessness - that is preventing homelessness from occurring in the first place - and to the prevention of *secondary* homelessness – that is the prevention of recurrent episodes of homelessness.

In a similar vein, the Westminster government (ODPM, 2003) has identified three stages where local authority (or other agency) intervention can prevent homelessness: (a) ‘early intervention’ where those at risk are identified and services provided to support the person and their environment; (b) ‘pre-crisis intervention’ which can take the form of advice services, family mediation, negotiation with landlords to avoid imminent loss of a home, and services targeted at people at known risk points such as those leaving LA care, prison or the armed forces; and (c) work ‘preventing recurring homelessness’. Tenancy sustainment is seen as key to this activity, especially where there are problems that cannot be resolved by rehousing alone. (For further details about ‘homelessness prevention’ activities see Pawson et al (2006)).

Government-sponsored research suggests that, at least in England, LAs have responded positively to the new prevention-centred ethos promoted from the centre (HQNS, 2004; Pawson et al, forthcoming 2007). Concerns at the housing management pressures resulting from rising homelessness numbers in the years to 2003, as well as the ‘carrot’ of additional funding, have been factors here.

A significant aspect of the new ‘prevention focused approach’ as rolled out in many LAs is the ‘housing options’ interview. Increasingly, authorities have introduced procedures where everyone seeking housing assistance due to homelessness is required to participate in an initial ‘housing options’ discussion. Rather than immediately homing in on an applicant’s legal status according to the homelessness legislation, such interviews are intended to focus initial attention on practical steps to prevent homelessness occurring. This may be achieved by helping the applicant to either retain existing accommodation or undertake a planned move to a new address – most likely a private rented rather than social rented dwelling.

Only where – as revealed by housing options interview discussions – an applicant is actually or imminently homeless *and* where the

housing officer is convinced that there is no tenable 'prevention solution' is a formal homelessness assessment initiated. Under this model households claiming homelessness are encountering a two-stage process which replaces what would in many cases previously have been undertaken through a single homelessness assessment interview.

All of this has implications for official homelessness statistics. The growing use of housing options approaches could potentially reduce the number of households for whom a formal homelessness assessment is deemed necessary. Some housing options interviews will result in an initial judgement that an applicant, whilst *claiming* imminent or actual homelessness, is not lacking accommodation (or liable to lose such accommodation within 28 days). Given that households in these circumstances might otherwise have been subject to a formal homelessness assessment it may be that the number of formally recorded 'decisions' under a housing options regime will be lower than would otherwise be the case. Hence, part of the recorded reduction in 'assessment decisions' post-2003 (see Table 1) might be more of a reflection of filtering procedures rather than any reduction in underlying homelessness demand.

Measuring Local Authority Homelessness Prevention and its Effectiveness

As shown in Table 1 both homelessness assessment decisions and acceptances in England have fallen sharply since 2003. The latter have declined faster than at any time for more than 20 years. These figures are, without doubt, remarkable. However, as noted above, such trends are not necessarily entirely a reflection of housing problems solved through prevention activities. Critics argue that some activities badged as such act mainly to impose 'barriers to application' and/or diversion of applicants into unsuitable housing. Thus, where a housing options interview leads to an onward referral (e.g. to an agency tasked with helping people access private tenancies) rather than a full homelessness assessment, this can amount to 'gatekeeping' where homeless people are 'fobbed off' rather than having their cases properly considered (Hawkey, 2004). Similarly, Citizens Advice has asserted that 'local authorities may be deliberately pointing homeless applicants towards the housing application route in order to avoid accepting responsibilities under the homelessness legislation' (Citizens Advice, 2004, paragraph

2.2). Relating such practices to the legislation, they may be partly about raising the threshold for what is judged sufficient 'reason to believe' that the applicant may be homeless or threatened with homelessness – effectively a narrower interpretation of 'homelessness' in the legal sense.

Such observations call for monitoring systems measuring the extent to which LA assistance to people at risk of homelessness actually helps them avoid this outcome. Our ODPM study suggested that LA monitoring of individual prevention initiatives was generally not well developed. This might be seen as disappointing, especially given that many prevention schemes have been substantially funded by Central Government grant.

On the plus side, there were encouraging examples where local recording systems helped to back up staff assertions of 'positive impacts'. In relation to young people facing homelessness through 'family/friend exclusions', for example, two case study LAs recorded 40-50 per cent of cases where such households were referred to family mediation as resulting in reconciliation. Another council reported more than a quarter of its 'landlord mediation' interventions had resulted in the preservation of private tenancies under threat. And in a fourth authority a fifth of households assisted by a housing advice agency were logged as having been helped to avoid homelessness or secure a permanent tenancy. 'Outcome measures' of this kind were, however, relatively rare. Such monitoring as took place was usually limited to basic caseload or throughput measures – for example, the number of people using the service, the number assisted and budget spent. And although some staff asserted that certain sorts of 'solutions' were often sustained (e.g. private tenancies initially agreed for six months but subsequently renewed) formal monitoring of longer term outcomes was in no case identified.

Indirect Monitoring

In assessing the 'success' of certain homelessness prevention activities some local authorities included in the ODPM research saw it as adequate to rely exclusively on *indirect* monitoring. That is, tracking ongoing trends in the size of a specific cohort of households accepted as homeless – rather than *directly* measuring the impact of the prevention initiative on the service users targeted.

An example concerns authorities who saw the success of their family mediation activities purely in terms of trends in the number of households accepted as homeless due to ‘family/friend exclusion’ (i.e. being asked to leave the homes of parents, friends or other relatives).

In part, the reliance on the approach described above reflects a view that the prime objective of ‘homelessness prevention’ is to reduce pressure on social rented housing rather than necessarily to solve individuals’ housing problems per se. This has implications for the range of initiatives which can properly be described as ‘prevention activities’. A case in point concerns projects providing supported accommodation for young people and where a key aim is to implant ‘independent living skills’ as a prelude to a social rented tenancy. Such schemes – relatively common in Scotland – are described by the LAs concerned as ‘preventative’ on the grounds that they may help to improve the chances that a young person moving into a social sector property is able to ‘sustain their tenancy’ in the medium and longer term. In the mindset of some English LAs, however, such projects would not be regarded as true ‘prevention’ because they do not prevent the need to provide those concerned with a social tenancy.

A New Official Indicator of Effective Homelessness Prevention Activity

Rashleigh (2005) reported a perception among local authority staff that ODPM sees the ‘effectiveness’ of homelessness prevention initiatives as being measured mainly through recorded changes in homelessness acceptances. This was seen as a concern partly because it would suggest that little importance is attached to preventing homelessness involving single people of working age (because such households would not, in any case, be accepted as ‘in priority need’). Perhaps partly in response to such views Central Government in England has recognised the need for a more sophisticated approach to monitoring prevention activity. From 2005/06 LAs are required to make returns against a new statutory performance indicator designed as a direct measure of homelessness prevention effectiveness. Specifically, the measure, known as Best Value Performance Indicator 213 (BVPI 213) counts;

'households who considered themselves as homeless, who approached the local authority's housing advice service(s) and for whom housing advice casework intervention resolved their situation' (ODPM, 2005).

'Households who considered themselves homeless' are defined to include any applicant, irrespective of their priority need status. This seems to confound any perception that the government's interest is focused exclusively on reducing homelessness acceptances.

Whilst the definition refers to 'housing advice casework intervention' authorities are advised that this should also be interpreted broadly. This might involve information provision – e.g. explaining a private tenant's legal rights. Alternatively, it might consist of more substantive assistance such as acting to enforce those rights, or referring a client to family mediation to enable the retention of existing accommodation or helping a client access a private tenancy through a rent deposit or similar payment.

BVPI 213 must be seen as a brave attempt at quantification in a highly complex area. Local authorities have, however, expressed anxieties about the measure's robustness. Of particular concern is the definitional clause stating that an intervention which resolves an applicant's housing problems is one which 'is likely ... (to) be sustainable for a period of at least six months'. Whilst the sentiments underlying this definition are justified, it could prove difficult to operate in practice. The need for authorities to judge whether an intervention 'is likely' to result in a sustainable solution appears to weaken the indicator's credibility.

A further concern relates to the specified denominator for the new measure. Whilst it logs the number of 'successful interventions', the indicator does not record the total number of households assisted. It is therefore not possible to express 'successful interventions' as a proportion of all interventions. Instead, the specified denominator is the total number of households in the relevant local authority area. This seems somewhat odd given that underlying rates of homelessness are likely to be highly variable from authority to authority.

It would surely be more logical to express the number of 'successful interventions' in relation to the overall scale of 'expressed

homelessness demand' – that is, households seeking help with housing on the grounds of homelessness or 'homelessness applications'. It is notable that BVPI 213 does not restrict its scope to those applications where an officer judges that there is a 'reason to believe' that the applicant might be homeless or threatened with homelessness. In this way, the definition lends some official recognition of 'homelessness' as a concept self-defined by the applicant. We would see this as lending weight to the arguments for re-shaping the official homelessness monitoring system in England to encompass all 'applications' – defined as 'approaches by households seeking help with housing on the grounds of homelessness'. Applying this in the Scottish context would call for revised Central Government guidance so that the minority of LAs which currently 'filter' homeless applicants before recording them altered their practices here.

Direct recording of homelessness applications would, of course, represent a significant departure from current practice in England. Definitional issues would arise from the fact that – unlike assessment decisions – applications (as specified in this way) would have no legal status. Consequently, inter-authority comparisons might be of limited value only. However, such comments apply in equal measure to BVPI 213 itself. In the authors' view such statistics are anyway required to provide a more complete picture of homelessness demand. Such reforms would also counter claims that promotion of housing options approaches is in part motivated by a wish to 'massage the statistics' such that appreciable numbers of people claiming homelessness but (informally) judged not to be so are simply excluded from the monitoring figures.

Another general issue raised by attempts to quantify homelessness prevention is the difficulty in defining the 'counter-factual scenario'. This is most clearly apparent in relation to 'tenancy sustainment' interventions. These target tenants judged as at 'high risk' of abandoning their homes and provide recipients with support – e.g. help with budgeting, applying for benefits, connecting with local services and networks. To what extent can it be assumed that, in the absence of such help, the households concerned would in fact have given up their tenancies? Similarly, with respect to BVPI 213, what certainty is there that every case subject to a 'successful intervention' would otherwise have resulted in actual homelessness? Even the LAs citing 40-50 per cent 'success rates' in

relation to people ‘at risk of homelessness’ referred to mediation services cannot be sure that without such intervention the households concerned would, in fact, have become homeless.

Conclusions

Tackling homelessness has been a high priority Central Government objective over the past decade and one where significant progress appears to have been made. In its commitments to tightly specified numerical targets Ministers have inevitably directed a spotlight to the integrity and appropriateness of statistical monitoring systems. Importantly, the statistics most often used to measure the incidence of homelessness (and – implicitly – the impact of prevention activities) are administratively based and susceptible to changes in administrative procedures. Neither – even in Scotland – can they be seen as a complete record of ‘expressed homelessness demand’. Survey-based data would be a better tool here⁵.

Somewhat belatedly, Government has acknowledged that the established official monitoring framework provides no measure of ‘active prevention’. However, whether BVPI 213 – the indicator proposed as such a measure – is likely to generate credible data is somewhat debatable. In spite of the detailed guidance on its precise definition (ODPM, 2005), scope for cross-local authorities comparability is likely to be limited. This is partly because of the absence of contextual figures on the overall flow of homelessness applications which would seem like the most logical denominator. More generally, the concerns surrounding the indicator only go to emphasize the slippery nature of homelessness prevention as a concept. Given the long running debates on defining homelessness itself this is perhaps not surprising.

⁵ The most comprehensive module on the experiences of homelessness can be found in the Scottish Household Survey. The survey enumerates people who had ‘slept rough within the previous two years’. It also asks whether respondents have experienced (any form of) ‘homelessness’ within this period and, if so, what agencies they had approached for help. In 2003/04, only half of the individuals identified as such had approached their LA housing and/or homelessness department for assistance. This confirms that a significant proportion of individuals defining themselves as having experienced homelessness could not have been recorded as such by their LA. For further details about the SHS see:

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Statistics/16002/14483>

Irrespective of its utility in producing authoritative statistics, however, the main value of the new indicator may be as a policy signal to LAs that (a) homelessness prevention services should not be targeted exclusively towards families and others liable to be classed as 'priority need' cases, and (b) the prime aim of such schemes should be the sustainable resolution of housing problems rather the diversion of demand away from the social rented sector.

In any case, the establishment of BVPI 213 comes too late to help explain the extent to which the 2003-2006 reduction in homelessness acceptances results mainly from successful resolution of applicants' housing problems as opposed to narrowing the interpretation of what constitutes 'homelessness'. Our own research would suggest that both these factors have contributed significantly.

Central Government's main concern is to ensure that LAs are practicing an actively 'preventative' approach to homelessness. It may be that statistical measures are not the best means of achieving this. Rather, assurance may be sought through the regulatory inspection of LA housing services (as carried out by the Audit Commission in England). Authorities themselves could also demonstrate their strong credentials through achieving 'quality kitemark' status for homelessness and housing advice services under frameworks such as the Community Legal Services Quality Mark scheme.

Note

Whilst the research on which the article draws was conducted for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) the views expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of central government.

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