

CHiP practitioner article

Tackling homelessness as a councillor

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for Changing Homelessness in Practice

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Shelter

As a forty-five year old balding male professional, I may appear to fit the typical stereotype of a Scottish Councillor on first impressions. However, as is so often the case, first impressions merely scratch the surface of reality. I have been a single parent for the last eleven years, which has changed my perspective on life in many ways.

I faced losing my home at one point during the disintegration of my marriage. Had that happened, my children, job and self-respect could quickly have followed and the thought of becoming homeless certainly concentrated my mind. I recognised that although some factors in our lives can be under our own control, there are many that are not. This has shown me that for people facing the possibility of homelessness, support at certain stages is not only useful and desirable but also often essential.

Getting elected

As my children grew older I wanted to put my experiences to good use. As a trade union representative I was asked to join the Labour Party 5 years ago, which provided many opportunities. I became Campaign Co-ordinator, Election Agent, Candidate then elected Councillor in rapid succession.

Since my election in May 2003 I have held two positions in succession, firstly Labour Group Secretary on the council and then City Housing Convener. This latest position entails huge responsibility, a great deal to learn and a daunting agenda. The Scottish Parliament has been busy when it comes to housing, introducing legislation including the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001, and the Homelessness etc. (Scotland) Act 2003.

Being City of Dundee Housing Convener

The memories of my own brush with homelessness were still fresh when I was introduced as Housing Convener to the Housing Management team for the first time. They asked me what my political priorities were, and, due to a combination of my past experience and my present beliefs, I felt that customer care and homeless people had to be my top priorities.

I was lucky to find myself as part of a team that is open and receptive, happy to educate a novice and understanding of the needs of homeless people. The team includes a housing strategist who had a good grasp of the issues and a shrewd mind for strategy formulation, as well as a City Housing Manager who had developed strategies against anti-social behaviour. Fortunately they, along with the other key local players, had developed the draft Homelessness Strategy by May 2003 so I was able to present that to the Housing Committee in June. I'll talk more about that strategy in detail later in this article.

Tackling the role

Through liaison with relevant staff in the departments and agencies that manage hostels I have begun to get to know what really goes on and the issues faced by those who actually experience homelessness in Dundee. I hope that making my priorities known will have a tangible effect on these particular issues. By giving the issue of homelessness a higher profile politically, I am confident that real change will be possible.

Closer contact between organisations working with homeless people and myself, on behalf of the council, will enable us to eliminate any potential friction before it arises, and should also result in the introduction of best practice for tackling issues at the minor end of the spectrum. I have already raised the profile of homelessness within the council, and have made a point of circulating relevant briefings to my colleagues.

One result of this is that I, along with my colleagues in the Administration, have looked afresh at how we should deal with rent arrears, and the policy of enrolling people in court where there is a benefits assessment in progress. This has produced improvements in various council departments and has hopefully assisted in improvements in the processing of benefits claims that will, in turn, reduce pressures on those in receipt of benefits.

It has been important for me to get to grips with as much of the background to my role as possible so I have attended seminars given by the Scottish Council for Single Homeless and Shelter. I have also contacted Shelter to discuss various cases; where appropriate asking for an investigation to be carried out, thus enabling me to ascertain what the most important issues are when it comes to dealing with homeless people.

I have visited the Homelessness Unit at the Lily Walker Centre in Dundee (<http://www.dundee.gov.uk/housing/index.html>) which provides services to meet the council's statutory responsibilities to homeless people in conjunction with relevant voluntary sector organisations, met with the local staff and expressed my support for the cause of improving the lot of homeless people. Sometimes looking after this side of housing is not the most glamorous aspect of the job, but it can often be the most rewarding, especially when we see a success (although the failures can be heartbreaking). The figures show that approximately 27% of homeless people re-circulate round all the different provider groups. By looking at provisions for support, I would hope that the action taken by the Housing Department in Dundee will encourage a reduction in that figure, as a result of the Scottish Executive funding included in the Dundee Homelessness Strategy.

I have also discovered that there is a core of dedicated professionals who genuinely care about the work they are doing, yet tend to attract criticism as a result of having to carry out their jobs in a poorly funded environment. Most housing staff do their best to do a good

job in difficult circumstances. Recognising this was a real insight for me; as a layperson it is all too easy to be casually critical of “the council”.

It is obvious for me, even at this stage that there is *no single model* that will fit everyone; each area must develop its own strategy.

The council's role

As with all Scottish councils, the role of Dundee City Council includes the following responsibilities that impact on how we deal with homelessness:

- to formulate and implement policy, both from within and in response to Scottish Executive statutory requirements, housing needs to be represented on the Community Plan and draw up a Local Housing Strategy (that is required to incorporate homelessness provision)
- to work with Housing associations, other RSLs and private landlords to develop, deliver and sustain quality housing as required by the Scottish Housing Standard
- to ensure that we do what we say we will in our Homelessness Strategy.

In addition the council has a duty to maximise the rent collected from its tenants. Whilst I applaud and support this, it does mean that certain tenants must be persuaded to pay up and sometimes evictions must be threatened or carried out as a sanction of last resort. This is despite the fact that our strategy concentrates on prevention of homelessness and support.

Our strategy offers a range of support measures including welfare rights. Whilst offers of support are made and usually accepted, we are also planning to move people to reduce the need to resort to eviction further by moving people to Short Scottish Secure Tenancies (SSSTs) and ensuring that their entitlements will not be reduced by being supported in this way.

The council also has a duty to act responsibly and to promote policies for the well being of all its citizens, and this always has to be balanced with the wishes of the populace and their priorities. In addition, there is a requirement to provide equal opportunity for all, and I strongly welcome this although again, it is not always easy to put into practice.

The legal position

From my first day as Housing Convener, I was an avid reader of the legislation relevant to my position. The Homelessness etc. (Scotland) Act, 2003 introduces a number of measures that will eradicate the barriers which homeless people in Scotland face when trying to access housing through the homelessness laws. The Act makes radical changes

to legal hurdles such as priority need, internationality, and local connection, and most importantly gives everyone in Scotland the right to a home.

However, despite being briefed by the housing officers, I found it difficult to come to terms with some of the contradictions inherent within the separate strands of the legislation, such as those between the Homelessness Act and some of the current anti-social behaviour legislation, and I don't claim to have all the solutions.

I also still believe there are real difficulties in trying to reconcile Scottish Executive performance indicators, the demands of tenants, and the needs of homeless people but there have also been real legislative successes. I genuinely feel that the Homelessness Act is one of the most progressive pieces of legislation of recent times, and credit is due to those responsible for introducing and implementing it.

Dundee's homelessness strategy

Strategies that incorporate prevention of problems alongside solutions to existing problems must be developed, to ensure dignity for those classed as homeless. As I mentioned earlier, Dundee has had a homelessness strategy since June 2003. Our policy is to provide a comprehensive set of measures to address problems at all stages if possible and this involves:

- mediation, in partnership with SACRO (<http://www.sacro.org.uk/>)
- access to the Dundee Families Project to provide support
- supporting and developing the Lily Walker Centre for the Homeless
- close working with providers:
 - the Cyrenians (<http://www.cyrenian.co.uk/>)
 - Shelter (<http://www.shelter.org.uk>)
 - the Salvation Army (<http://www.salvationarmy.org.uk/en/home.htm>) and Crisis and its Fairshare project (<http://www.crisis.org.uk/>)
- implementing the Supporting People programme and the Community warden scheme
- the creation of 82 new units of supported accommodation
- incorporating the Homelessness strategy into the Local Housing Strategy.

We are also currently working on developing our facilities and practice based on:

- a comprehensive joint assessment of need
- maximisation of resources
- developing affordable, sustainable accommodation
- improving and increasing access to and co-ordination of services for homeless people

- preventing homelessness, through joint working and listening to homeless people
- maintaining our focus on meeting the deadlines required by the Homelessness Act.

In the following sections I'll take a look at how this is manifesting itself in our actions.

To read the Dundee City Council Homelessness Strategy in detail, please visit: <http://www.dundee.gov.uk/publications/homeless.pdf>.

Homelessness provision

Many people in Dundee depend on Housing Benefit and so it is important for the council to maximise access to benefits and entitlements, with advice and assistance. Two recent appointments of housing staff, as part of the City's homelessness strategy, are solely to be used to fill in benefits claims and ensure that claimants receive the housing benefits that will allow them to stay in social rented accommodation.

The delivery of services is a joint activity with other organisations, as you will have seen from the list above, that are often working with the most challenging groups. When it comes to individuals who may be mentally ill, drug abusers, alcoholics or sex offenders, challenges can range from anti-social tendencies at best, to threatening behaviour and violence at worst.

The needs of these individuals may often severely challenge both services and staff to breaking point.

The question of how we can successfully reintegrate people back into society using allocation policies that balance the needs of all is still open, and I wish I had a complete answer to it. For the moment we are facing some issues and trying out some initiatives to try to tackle it as best we can. There are no easy answers to many of the questions arising in this area, and it is perhaps important to remember that some of the issues are ideological as well as practical. For example, is it useful, or right, to send people on detox courses if we cannot change the culture and environment they must return to?

Support provision

My belief is that for homelessness to be tackled successfully, the root causes need to be dealt with. It is crucial that Supporting People initiatives are employed and we must adopt an approach that combines eradicating the symptoms with addressing the causes. I mentioned above that Dundee has taken an innovative approach, and the Dundee Families Project run by NCH (<http://www.nch.org.uk>) in the west of the city is all about providing exactly this kind of support to those who need it. This project has been copied by various authorities in England (although not yet elsewhere in Scotland). It was

established in the face of local suspicion and media hostility; however, it is now welcomed and is operating successfully.

In Dundee there are also provisions in place so that there is no need for anyone to sleep rough in the streets, unless exceptional circumstances arise. There is sufficient accommodation provision available, and space can always be found for those who need it. There are currently around six people in the city who sleep rough. These individuals are known to have used hostels in the past, and the new homelessness legislation empowers us to ask them why they are now sleeping rough, and then enables us to accommodate their wishes and needs. This is a major step forward in the provision of care and support. The quality of accommodation available may not always be up to the high standards we would ideally like to see, but proposals are being put in place to better the situation, and our facilities in Dundee have, in the main, been upgraded.

Challenges

It has to be said though that implementing the new legislation and adhering to homelessness strategies is not going to be simple. I can envisage that councils may face any or all of the following situations:

- problems resulting from the views of longer-term tenants about homeless people getting priority status and seemingly queue jumping.
- a clash of lifestyles when younger people or those with challenging behaviour are placed in communities which cannot/will not accept alternative lifestyles
- the reality that many sixteen-year-olds will require support in their tenancy to maintain payments; this in addition to behavioural issues, and the effects of chaotic lifestyles on other residents
- a struggle given that rent collection is a performance indicator
- budgetary concerns as the cost of supporting people in their tenancy comes from a fixed budget, so funds will only increase if resources are cut from other areas
- a circular process of incurring staff time costs whilst they are carrying out procedures to get benefits to cover costs.

Our strategy will bring forward new accommodation and support services to meet the demands on housing units. Discussions will continue with the Dundee Federation of Tenants' Associations (DFTA), which acknowledges that there is a requirement to accommodate homeless people. By working together and within the allocation regulations we will meet the requirements of homeless people. The homelessness legislation also empowers us to work with RSLs so that housing support services will target priority households, especially the vulnerable, such as young people. By working between

Housing Benefits and Welfare Rights staff we can maximise payments to those entitled to under the legislation.

In conclusion

For me to continue to play my part in working towards ending homelessness in Dundee I have found that I need to concentrate on certain aspects of my remit as a Councillor. Here are the areas that I am currently tackling:

- making personal progress as a Councillor and towards fulfilling my duty as elected representative for the people who live in my ward
- developing as Housing Convener, especially the changes I hope to oversee across a broad range of issues, although the homelessness agenda will be a priority
- making progress with Shelter, Scottish Council for Single Homeless, the Cyrenians, Dundee Survival Group and the anti-poverty forum to tackle the issues raised and highlight the plight of people in need
- acting as an advocate for change within the council and other groups to review the way that we look at homelessness, its causes and implementation of change
- reviewing how I work with my council colleagues to ensure that the issues are *not* used as a political football
- finally ensuring, along with the Housing Department, that homeless people are given a voice that is listened to and acted upon.

If I can achieve success in all these areas then I feel that I will have been able to make a difference to the lives of homeless people and potentially homeless people in Dundee.

Further information

If you would like to contact Chris Hind for more information about his work, please email chip@shelter.org.uk in the first instance.