Responses to Housing and Homelessness during COVID-19

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Background

Fulfilling Lives South East Partnership work to improve the lives of people with multiple and complex needs, many of whom are currently homeless, or have a history of homelessness. We have therefore been particularly concerned about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on people experiencing homelessness, as they are likely to be disproportionately at risk. During the crisis, services have been under pressure to meet the needs of this client group in the face of restrictive working practices. Yet despite the challenges of the past several months, there are many instances where **service providers have responded with urgency, flexibility and innovation** in order to meet needs.

One of the most significant responses has been the **provision of temporary accommodation for large numbers of street homeless people** in hotels and other repurposed venues, in order to keep them safe from the transmission of COVID-19.

This brief report brings together experiences and examples of the impact of COVID-19 on services that provide housing for homeless people (both supported and unsupported), and those services that provide support for homeless people to access and sustain their accommodation placements. Our findings highlight several examples of flexible responses that suggest possibilities for **improving approaches to housing and housing related support that might be sustained in the longer term as COVID-19 response measures ease**. It is our hope that this learning might help to inform services who support people experiencing homelessness, and those with multiple and complex needs as they plan to resume operations under less restrictive conditions.

About this research

This research was conducted between April and June 2020 in order to capture experiences during the initial response to COVID-19 and ensure these could be shared to inform transition planning. We gathered our findings from multiple sources which included:

- A survey of staff in the voluntary sector and in local authorities in Brighton and East Sussex who have a role in providing housing or housing-related support. The questions were adapted from the 'Collaborate: For Social Change' tool for capturing social insights.[1] The survey was open for a period of two weeks in early June. The survey had 12 respondents in total from the South East Region.
- A survey conducted with Fulfilling Lives' client-facing workers to assess the initial impact of COVID-19 and the subsequent response measures on their client work.
- A focus group with the Fulfilling Lives client-facing workers, and additional written feedback from those who were unable to attend the focus group.

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[1] http://wordpress.collaboratei.com/wp-content/uploads/Collaborate-CIC.-Learning-Framework-April-2020.pdf

Impact of COVID-19 on housing practices

Safety

The most notable change to the safety of individuals at the time of the initial COVID-19 response was the effort to accommodate all street homeless people during this period. This led to a more physically secure space for people who had been rough sleeping. However, this also had implications for those already in the process of move-on during this period. One Fulfilling Lives client who had planned a move to less supported accommodation had this move put on hold because all accommodation options were full, leaving them in an environment they perceived to be unsafe and feeling unable to progress.

Evictions from temporary accommodation during the initial COVID-19 response were discouraged. For some Fulfilling Lives clients this resulted in an increased sense of emotional safety, and geographical stability during this period. However, **some evictions did continue to take place locally during this period**. One client experienced an accommodation placement breakdown and was moved into an emergency accommodation placement which was also unsuitable for their needs. This lack of sustainable options led to the individual becoming street homeless and sofa surfing at a time when the UK was experiencing high rates of COVID-19 infection.

It was reported that some aspects building maintenance and upkeep in temporary accommodation changed during this period. **Increased cleaning was beneficial for improving hygiene, but also the look and feel of the environment**. Some temporary accommodation providers also reported that they were conducting enhanced risk assessments on their premises to ensure staff and resident safety during this period. However, it was also reported that in some temporary accommodation, non-essential repair work and room inspections were paused due to the risk of spreading coronavirus. While this may have left some residents with unresolved maintenance issues, it reportedly also **allowed some residents to feel less intruded upon and safer from potential eviction**.

Temporary accommodation **staffing levels were perceived to have reduced during the initial COVID-19 response**. This reduction led to some concern that **residents could be at increased risk of abuse or exploitation** from other residents. This was exacerbated further by support workers and other face-to-face services not being able to meet them in person and conduct a visual assessment or have an in-person conversation with individuals. No visitors were allowed into emergency or temporary accommodation buildings during this period. This, compounded by a lack of entertainment such as TVs or internet access, left some residents feeling bored and restless. Fulfilling Lives workers also reported that many of their clients struggled to comply with social distancing, with some leaving their accommodation to meet friends or purchase drugs.

'[There has been] much more cleaning than usual, increased use of PPE'

-Floating Support Service Staff Member

Trust and Support

During the initial COVID-19 response, perceived trust between clients and workers in some services was perceived to increase. One worker observed that there had been increased outreach with the street community since COVID-19, and seeing clients more regularly meant they built trust and felt that engagement was more likely than before.

It was also felt that **the welfare of homeless people was supported in a more holistic way** during this period. Day centres and healthcare providers supplied toiletries, mobile phones, radios and food parcels. This type of support led to an increase in trust from individuals as they felt cared about and prioritised. Fulfilling Lives workers observed that staff from across the sector appeared to have a positive outlook on people who experience homelessness and showed more insight into why some may struggle to adapt to housing provision. This led to a more person-centred approach which was also welcomed by clients of Fulfilling Lives.

'Increased time/effort spent contacting 'hard to reach' women, recognition of some wider needs'

-Specialist Women's Services Staff Member

The increase in contact and person-centred approaches was also reflected in staff experiences. Some **staff in client-facing services reported receiving more time with their line managers, and increased space to think and speak reflectively about their approach to their work**. For example, one respondent said that they had experienced an increase in contact with their team and managers, and more opportunities to talk. Another respondent reflected that the increase in working form home had improved work-life balance. There were also mentions of flexible management practices, and praise of video conferencing.

Choice

The initial COVID-19 response placed restrictions on the whole population. In addition to the new rules imposed nationally during this period, homeless people experienced **decreased flexibility in housing options**, reduced availability of supported accommodation and increased out of area placements as demand for housing grew. Other services such as drop-ins, day centres and other in-person activities paused operations, leaving homeless people with fewer channels of support.

However, some Fulfilling Lives clients reportedly experienced an increase in options and flexibility during this time. There was an **increase in telephone and video call appointments**, which reduced barriers that previously prevented some people from attending in-person appointments. Workers focused more on providing internet access, digital devices and supporting digital inclusion during this period. This meant that **individuals were more able to choose to take part in online recovery communities** and support than before.

There was also an **increase in person-centred approaches** during the period. temporary accommodation providers seemed more invested in providing basic entertainment and internet access for vulnerable tenants, which was reportedly not seen as a priority before COVID-19. It was felt by Fulfilling Lives workers that **housing workers were more empathetic** and person-centred with people facing homelessness, and that their needs were

met by all workers in a more holistic way than before – addressing health, wellbeing and housing needs in a more joined up way.

'[Staff have] consistently been going above and beyond normal practice to ensure services are staffed appropriately and clients receive support'

-Advice Service Worker

Collaboration and partnership working

Most respondents working in housing and housing-related services did not feel that they had created new partnerships during the initial COVID-19 response but had strengthened or adapted existing relationships. There was some consensus that there was **more openness to explore joint solutions and pool resources** during this period. New collaborative meetings like the COVID-19 response cells supported joint working, making sure clients were housed and their needs were met.

During this period, it was reported that there was increase in communication and partnership working between outreach, health, and drug and alcohol services regarding client welfare issues. COVID-19 restrictions also meant there were **changes in substitute prescribing practices, which supported some individuals to reduce substance misuse but posed a potential risk to others**. Fulfilling Lives' workers reported that some clients had been moved to two-weekly prescriptions and were no longer required to have supervised consumption. While it was felt that some clients benefited from feeling trusted to manage their prescriptions with less supervision, there was concern that others were taking home larger quantities of methadone and therefore at greater risk. These issues were quickly resolved through communication between services.

In response to the decrease in face to face contact time that clients had with drug and alcohol services, some outreach workers **increased doorstep visits and video calls** to clients in their accommodation. During this time another client accessed support and agreed to go on a substitute prescription. This clients' support worker felt that this was perhaps due to reduced access to drugs and less income during lockdown.

Advice services worked closely with the DWP to encourage referrals so that those facing homelessness received support if they were unable to pay rent or top-up fees for their accommodation. Finally, **Multi-agency meetings were reported to be better attended** and easier to organise via online platforms compared with when those meetings were face-to-face. This meant agencies were better informed and organised around an persons' needs.

Where new partnerships were formed, these were commonly between housing services and food trusts and kitchens. These partnerships allowed people regular access to food which was delivered to their doors to support social distancing.

'More collaboration, more kindness, more flexibility, more innovation'

-Floating Support Service Staff Member

Factors enabling sustainable change

From our findings, there are several factors that have enabled positive change and responsiveness during COVID-19, and it may be that these can be sustained into the future as services resume operations under less restrictions. We would encourage services to reflect on the 'questions for consideration' below as they continue to adapt to the ongoing impact of COVID-19 on people experiencing homelessness, and those with multiple and complex needs.

Technology

- Collaborating via online platforms and video conferencing tools backed up by good IT support.
- Taking advantage of quality information and webinars through Homeless Link.
- Provision of internet access, phones, and laptops to clients who were isolated in their accommodation.

Questions to consider

- What could be the benefits of providing internet access for people staying in temporary accommodation in the future?
- How could clients who have engaged well with online appointments be supported to continue to do this?
- What can we do to make sure people who are less able to engage with technology continue to receive a good service?

Flexible staff and volunteers

- Workers and services prepared to change what they do and how they work to support people experiencing homelessness.
- Opportunities for reflection and discussion with teams and managers.

Questions to consider

- Which changes have genuinely improved choice and flexibility for people who use homeless housing related support services?
- Which changes are possible for services to sustain, and what resources would be needed to achieve this?
- How have staff been protected from 'burnout' during this period, and can any of these practices be put in place in the longer term?

Good service planning

- Conducting risk assessments, providing effective staff support, and updating policies and procedures in a flexible way.

- How can any positive changes to partnership working be built on in the future?
- Would a more assertive outreach model (in-person, on the phone or online) create better outcomes for people who use services?
- How could we apply our learning to practical planning for possible future waves of COVID-19?

This report draws together the experiences and perspectives of staff from housing and homelessness services in Brighton and Hove and East Sussex, as well as the perspectives of the client-facing workers in Fulfilling Lives South East Partnership.

We would like to acknowledge and thank everyone who contributed to this report by completing the survey and participating in the focus group.

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For more information about Fulfilling Lives South East Partnership visit

https://www.bht.org.uk/fulfilling-lives

Fulfilling Lives South East Partnership is a National Lottery Community Fund programme.

For more information about the national Fulfilling Lives programme visit www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/funding/strategic-investments/multiple-needs

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