

Development Department

Knowledge, Understanding and Views of Homelessness amongst Service Providers

Lyn Jardine, Chartered Institute of Housing in Scotland and Kate Bilton, Scottish Executive

This research was undertaken to explore the knowledge, views and understanding of homelessness held by service providers. It focussed on providers working in local authorities, the voluntary sector and for Registered Social Landlords (RSLs). The research aimed to consider factors which may influence the views of service providers and the extent to which the quality of services provided may be affected by the knowledge, understanding and views of homelessness held by those who provide it. This research has been overseen by the Awareness Raising and Best Practice sub group of the Homelessness Monitoring Group. It contributes to the work of the sub group in progressing recommendation 33 of the Homelessness Task Force in relation to culture and training. Recommendation 33 begins “All service providers, statutory and voluntary, should ensure that they are promoting values, attitudes and behaviour which deliver responsive and personalised services.”

Main Findings

- **Knowledge of Scottish Executive objectives:** The great majority of respondents (90%) felt that they had a good understanding of the Scottish Executive’s objectives to address homelessness and even more (96%) felt that their organisation was committed to delivering these objectives.
- **Views on Scottish Executive objectives:** Just over half (55%) of respondents did not feel that the abolition of priority need was fair and 59% felt that the plan to suspend local connection was not fair. Views on the abolition of priority need and the plan to suspend local connection appear to reflect concerns about resource issues and the practicality of achieving these objectives rather than opposition to the objectives in principle.
- **Personal experience of homelessness:** Nearly two thirds (64%) of respondents reported that either they themselves, or someone they knew well, had been threatened with or experienced homelessness. Personal experience of homelessness was highest in the voluntary sector (75%), followed by local authorities (65%) and Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) (41%).
- **Views on choice:** Approximately three quarters (77%) of respondents felt that homeless households should have the same choice about where they live as non-homeless households.
- **Experience and views on choice:** There was some correlation with respondents’ personal experience of homelessness and their views on choice. Local authority respondents were more likely to agree that ‘homeless households should have the same choice about where they lived as others in housing need’ if they had personal experience of homelessness, and RSL respondents were less likely to agree with equal choice if they did not have personal experience of homelessness. RSL respondents without personal experience of homelessness were also more likely to agree (than those who did have such experience) that it was becoming harder to achieve balanced communities as the number of homeless cases increases.

- **Views on organisational capacity:** Despite concerns about resources, the great majority of respondents (92%) felt that their 'organisations were consistently responsive to the needs of homeless people' and 84% felt that their organisation had policies and procedures in place which helped them to 'effectively assist homeless people'.
- **Views on advice and information:** Just over two thirds of respondents (68%) felt that there was enough information available to them to advise homeless people of their housing options.
- **Views on vulnerability, intentionality and prioritisation:** Concepts of vulnerability and intentionality appeared important in explaining how respondents prioritised housing need. Local authority and RSL respondents felt that intentionally homeless households should be given lower priority for housing than unintentionally homeless households, those on housing waiting lists and those on transfer lists. Respondents felt unintentionally homeless households should have highest priority (voluntary sector respondents were not asked to answer this question).
- Asked about intentionality and choice, the majority of respondents (61%) agreed that 'homeless people who could have avoided becoming homeless should not expect the same degree of choice as others in need of rehousing'. However, a significant minority of respondents (39%) did not support this view. Voluntary sector respondents were most likely to disagree (68% compared to 36% of local authority respondents and just 15% of RSLs). Nearly all respondents (96%) felt that it would be fair to provide individual support to people who had previously failed tenancies.
- **Prioritising choice:** While respondents clearly felt unintentionally homeless households deserved highest priority for housing and supported equal choice for homeless households, three quarters of respondents (75%) also felt that they were housing increasing numbers of homeless people at the expense of others who have a recognised housing need.
- **Views on awareness of general public:** Nearly three quarters (72%) of respondents felt that their jobs would be easier if the general public had a better understanding of homelessness; and a greater majority (89%) of respondents agreed that the public are generally not interested in homeless issues unless they are directly affected.
- **Influence on service provision:** There was some indication that views held by the media and general public narrowed the parameters within which service providers could act. While achieving positive outcomes for homeless clients increased levels of job satisfaction it could also leave respondents feeling isolated from others in their organisation and outside agencies.
- The majority of respondents did feel that **achieving balanced communities** was becoming more difficult as the number of homeless cases increased (74% agreeing) and that they had estates/neighbourhoods where existing tenants would react badly to a homeless person or family moving in (62%). Just 8% (16) respondents, however, ranked the views of 'other tenants/the neighbourhood' as one of the four most important factors to take into account when considering a homeless household for a vacancy, and the opinions of homeless clients were considered most important to take into account when delivering services to homeless people.
- **Views on joint working:** Respondents were generally positive about the policies and procedures their organisation had in place for joint working (80% agreeing these were in place) and over three quarters (79%) felt that good relations existed between the local authority and other service providers. However, respondents also felt that more 'ownership' of homelessness was needed at a corporate level and that other professions needed to take greater responsibility for homelessness.
- **Experience of Abuse:** Respondents reported high levels of abuse from homeless clients, with just under half (49%) stating that they sometimes or regularly suffered abuse while carrying out their duties. Abuse was highest in the local authority sector, where just 11% of respondents 'never' suffered abuse. Respondents referred to the increased emotional stress clients could be under at the point of reporting to homeless services as an explanation of why abuse may occur.
- **Views on approach to addressing homelessness:** Respondents felt that a shift of focus from securing outputs, for example the provision of accommodation, to achieving outcomes for individual clients, for example improved tenancy sustainment skills, is needed. It was felt that achieving an outcomes focus would require strong leadership both locally and nationally. Participants also stressed the importance of preventative work, both in achieving outcomes for households and individuals and as a way to best manage resources.

The research

In 2005, the Scottish Executive funded the Chartered Institute of Housing to undertake research to explore service providers' knowledge, views and understanding of homelessness. The research aimed to examine:

- The knowledge, understanding and views of homelessness held by front line staff and managers working with homeless people.
- The influences on these individuals that impact on or shape the views that they hold.
- Any impact that the knowledge, understanding and views held by these individuals has on the quality of the services they provide.
- Any future work that may be required to change attitudes towards homeless people which currently negatively impact on service provision.

A questionnaire was administered to front line staff and managers working with homeless people in a variety of organisations between 6th September and 27th October 2005. Two hundred and fifty completed questionnaires and 50 partially completed questionnaires were returned. The following analysis is based upon the 250 completed responses. Most responses (90%) were received from respondents working in local authorities, voluntary organisations or working for a Registered Social Landlord (RSL). RSLs are independent housing organisations registered with Communities Scotland under the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001. Responses were sought from RSLs rather than other social landlords in recognition of the statutory duties that RSLs have under the homeless legislation to assist homeless people.

The Respondents

The majority of all responses received were from local authority respondents: 143 (or 57%) of all responses received. A further 49 responses (20%) were received from voluntary sector organisations, 32 (13%) from RSLs and 26 (10%) from other service providers. There was a good geographical spread with the large urban authority areas (Glasgow City, City of Edinburgh, Dundee, Aberdeen, Stirling and Falkirk) representing 29% of all respondents. Responses were received from a range of urban/rural and mixed authority areas.

Respondents from the voluntary sector were not asked to complete Section 2 'Your Landlord Function': results from this section are based on the 201 responses received from local authority, RSL and 'other' respondents. This section contained questions on: balance between housing homeless

people and those on waiting lists; prioritisation; reaction of estates/neighbourhoods; and ensuring balanced communities.

While the majority of responses received came from local authorities (57%), in most cases responses were received from a variety of different organisations representing different sectors within each local authority area. Two areas were unusual in this respect: in Dumfries and Galloway all responses received came from RSLs and in Midlothian 70% of responses were from the voluntary sector.

Follow up discussions were held with staff from homelessness services in November 2005, providing an opportunity to explore some of the issues raised by the questionnaire in more detail. Meetings were held in Inverness, Dundee and Glasgow. Participants were asked to comment on the themes arising from the survey results.

This research has been overseen by the Awareness Raising and Best Practice sub group which was established by the Homelessness Monitoring Group in April 2005. It contributes to the work of the sub group in progressing recommendation 33 of the Homelessness Task Force in relation to culture and training. Recommendation 33 begins "All service providers, statutory and voluntary, should ensure that are promoting values, attitudes and behaviour which deliver responsive and personalised services."

Experience of Homelessness and contact with homeless clients

Addressing homelessness was a significant aspect of the jobs of a majority of respondents, and many of them were often dealing directly with people experiencing homelessness. Ninety eight respondents (39%) spent all their time addressing homeless issues and only 4 respondents (2%) spent no time on homeless issues. The majority of respondents spent either most or all of their time addressing homelessness issues (65%). Over half of the respondents (147 or 59%) spent the majority of their time dealing directly with homeless people.

Who are services delivered to?

Respondents provided services to a wide range of groups: the majority of respondents indicated that all the groups listed in the questionnaire used their services, with most groups being selected by between 83 and 94 per cent of respondents (respondents were able to select as many options as applicable).

Over half of the respondents indicated that black and minority ethnic (BME) households used their services, though 48% of respondents did not select this group. 'Households

with children' were the next least frequently selected group, however, just 17% of respondents did not indicate that they delivered services to this group.

That a significant minority of respondents did not say that BME households used their services may reflect the uneven geographic spread of BME households across Scotland. It may also indicate a lack of recording – for example it is possible that some respondents were not familiar with the abbreviation 'BME' which was used in the survey. Participants at follow-on discussion groups felt that most respondents would have been familiar with this abbreviation and that the result was more likely to reflect lower numbers of BME people presenting as homeless. Participants at the Inverness event were much more likely to say that they were not familiar with the term than attendees at either of the other two groups. Inverness participants felt that their lack of familiarity with the term was explained by the low number of BME households in the Inverness area. This result does suggest that there may be training needs around providing services to black and minority ethnic households as some providers will have little experience in this area.

Respondents were also asked to say which groups they dealt with most often by indicating up to three groups from a list of 13 options. There was no clear dominant group; for example, 'single people' was the group chosen most often, but with only 46% of respondents selecting this group as one of their top three, there was still a majority (54%) who did not select it. No respondents indicated that BME households were one of the three groups that they dealt with most often.

Personal experience of homelessness

Sixty four per cent of respondents reported that either they themselves, or someone they knew well, had been threatened with or experienced homelessness. There was some sectoral variation evident here, with personal experience of homelessness being lower than average among RSL respondents (41% compared to 64%) and higher than average amongst respondents from voluntary organisations (75%).

There was also some correlation (for some sectors) between whether respondents themselves or someone close to them had either experienced or been threatened with homelessness and their views on choice, intentionality, balanced communities and the abolition of priority need. These issues are discussed in more detail in later sections and are raised here specifically in relation to levels of personal experience.

The majority of local authority respondents agreed that homeless households should have the same choice about where they live as non-homeless households: where they had personal experience of homelessness; they were more likely

to be in favour of this than if they did not have such experience. For RSL respondents, a lack of personal experience correlates with thinking homeless households should not have the same degree of choice.

Voluntary sector respondents who had personal experience of homelessness were more likely to disagree with the statement that those who could have avoided becoming homeless should not expect the same degree of choice as others in housing need, though the majority of voluntary sector respondents disagreed with this statement whether they had personal experience of homelessness or not.

RSL respondents were slightly more likely to agree that it was becoming harder to sustain balanced communities if they did not have any personal experience of homelessness (though the majority agreed whether they had personal experience or not) and they were more likely to think that the abolition of priority need was not fair if they had no personal experience of homelessness than if they did have such experience. RSL respondents with personal experience were more likely to think the plan to suspend local connection was not fair than those without.

Views on and understanding of Scottish Executive Policy

Levels of understanding of the Scottish Executive's objectives to address homelessness and recognition of organisations' commitment to achieving these were very high: 90% of respondents felt that they had a good understanding of the Scottish Executive's objectives and 96% felt that their organisation was committed to delivering these objectives. Voluntary sector respondents were slightly less likely to feel they had a good understanding of SE objectives with responses showing a greater spread. Voluntary sector respondents were more likely to disagree that they had a good understanding of the Executive's objectives if they did not think abolition of priority need was fair. However, the majority of voluntary respondents still agreed with the statement whatever their position on priority need.

There was less support for the abolition of priority need and the plan to suspend local connection. Just under half (45%) of respondents agreed that the abolition of priority need was fair and 41% felt that the plan to suspend local connection was fair.

There was some sectoral variation in these results with RSLs tending to be less supportive of the abolition of priority need than local authority or voluntary sector respondents (31% answering yes compared to 49% in the other two cases). Local authority respondents were more likely to feel that the

plan to suspend local connection was not fair (30% supporting the plan) and voluntary sector respondents were more likely to feel that it was fair (67% supporting the plan). It is worth noting that prior to the Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 RSLs were more likely to have waiting lists that were open to those from outwith their area and therefore it is likely that the suspension of local connection would not have such an impact on this sector. There is some variation between urban and rural local authority responses to local connection with a slightly higher positive response in urban authorities (38%) than rural (29%).

Given the positive responses to the question on organisational commitment and taking into account sectoral differences it seems likely that lower support for the abolition of priority need and the plan to suspend local connection indicates concern about the practical possibility of achieving these goals rather than a rejection of the goals in principle. Attendees at follow-up discussion groups highlighted concerns about the availability of resources to achieve the Executive's objectives and supported the interpretation that it is practical delivery which causes concern rather than disagreement with the objectives per se.

There was some correlation for local authority respondents between attitudes towards the abolition of priority need and the extent to which they agreed that homeless households should have the same degree of choice about where they lived as non-homeless households. Local authority respondents who did not agree that the abolition of priority need was fair were more likely to think that homeless households should not have the same degree of choice about where they lived, though the majority of local authority respondents agreed with choice whatever their position on priority need.

Organisational ability to effectively assist people experiencing homelessness

Respondents were positive about their organisation's ability to effectively assist homeless people, although there were some concerns about resource issues. Nearly all respondents (92%) agreed that their organisation was 'consistently responsive to the needs of individuals experiencing homelessness' and 84% of respondents agreed that 'the policies and procedures of my organisation help me to effectively assist homeless people'. Voluntary sector respondents were most positive about their organisations' policies and procedures with 63% completely agreeing with

this statement (as opposed to 29% of RSL and 30% of local authority respondents).

During follow-up discussions, participants raised the importance of seeking service user views as part of a measure of organisational responsiveness and highlighted the need for work to enable service users to participate effectively in such appraisals. There was some concern that the context of change in which homelessness service providers are operating may be affecting their ability to provide consistently responsive services.

Resources

Just under half of respondents (48%) felt that their organisation had sufficient staffing resources to enable them to deliver suitable services and around a third (35%) felt that their organisation had sufficient financial resources to enable them to do this. In both cases, resource issues were seen as a problem by a higher proportion of local authority respondents than RSL or voluntary sector respondents.

If local authority respondents did not think the plan to suspend local connection was fair they were more likely to feel that their organisation did not have sufficient staffing resources. RSL respondents were slightly more likely to agree that they had sufficient staffing resources if they agreed with suspending local connection.

RSL respondents were more likely to feel that their organisation did not have sufficient financial resources if they did not agree with the abolition of priority need and also if they felt suspending local connection was not fair.

Free text responses to survey questions indicated that voluntary sector respondents were concerned about the impact of short term funding streams on attracting and maintaining staff. For some local authority respondents, generic housing officers' roles were thought to leave insufficient time to devote to assessments of homeless applicants. On the other hand, where local authorities had dedicated homeless teams, it was seen to be difficult to achieve a balance between dealing with those presenting and maintaining involvement with ongoing cases.

Advice and information

Just over two thirds of respondents (68%) felt that 'there was enough information available to them to advise people experiencing (or threatened with) homelessness of all their housing options'. Asked about the quality of information available, 80% of respondents felt that 'the information and advice about services for homeless people and housing options' was either 'adequate' (40%) or 'good' (40%). Ten per cent of respondents felt the information and advice available was 'poor' and 10% felt it was 'excellent'.

Choice for homeless households and views on prioritising housing need

Respondents were asked a range of questions about whether they felt homeless households should have the same degree of choice in housing as non-homeless households, and about how they would prioritise different types of housing need. Respondents were positive about giving homeless households equal choice with non-homeless households: 77% of respondents felt that 'homeless households should have the same choice about where they live as non-homeless households'. RSLs were less likely to agree that homeless households should have the same choice than either respondents from local authorities or the voluntary sector (56% compared to 74% and 94% respectively). Voluntary sector respondents were most likely to agree that homeless households should have the same choice as non-homeless households.

Asked about intentionality and choice, the majority of respondents (61%) agreed with the statement that 'homeless people who could have avoided becoming homeless should not expect the same degree of choice as others in need of rehousing'. A significant minority of respondents, however, did not support this view (39%). There is evidence that respondents from the three main sectors represented answered this question quite differently. Voluntary sector respondents were more likely to disagree with the statement than either local authority or RSL respondents (68% compared to 36% of local authority respondents and just 15% of RSLs). RSL respondents agreed with the statement more strongly than local authority respondents. Only one voluntary sector respondent completely agreed that 'homeless people who could have avoided becoming homeless should not expect the same degree of choice as others in need of rehousing'.

There was strong support for the principle of providing individual support to people who had previously failed tenancies with 96% of respondents indicating they felt this would be fair. Over two thirds of respondents (68%) agreed that most 'homeless people will require support to help them sustain a tenancy long term'. Voluntary sector respondents were less likely to disagree with this statement than local authority or RSL respondents, and more likely to completely agree with it. Despite majority agreement with this statement, participants at follow-up discussions raised concerns about making generalisations regarding support needs across all homeless households. Participants felt that it was wrong to assume that all households would require support, and that for those that did, individual and cross-profession assessments were essential.

Respondents were given a list of ten factors that they might take into account when considering a homeless household for a vacancy and asked to select the four factors they would consider most important. The 'size/suitability of the property' (82%) and the 'availability of support services' (66%) were the most frequently chosen factors, followed by the 'proximity to the school of any children in the household' and 'proximity to family/friends'. The 'views of other tenants/the neighbourhood' were rarely selected as one of the most important options.

Prioritisation

Respondents were given a list of twelve 'types of housing need' and asked to select the four which they felt should be given the highest priority for housing. Ninety three per cent of respondents selected 'vulnerable homeless' as one of their four options, 'medical' and 'harassment/violence' options were both selected by 77% of respondents. 'Non-vulnerable homeless' was selected by 16% of respondents. The options selected least often were 'under-occupation' (4% or 8 respondents), 'intentionally homeless' (3% or 7 respondents) and 'aspirational move' (2% or four respondents).

Respondents were also asked to choose four possible causes of homelessness which they felt deserved the highest priority for housing from a list of 14 options. Respondents most often chose causes associated with vulnerability, and 'domestic abuse', 'young people leaving care' and 'mental health issues' were each selected by over 50% of respondents as one of their four choices. 'Relationship breakdown', 'people leaving hospital' and 'people leaving residential care' were also frequently selected. Options which were infrequently selected (with that selected most often first) were: 'chaotic lifestyle', 'ex-offender – release from prison', 'financial problems', 'other', 'anti-social behaviour', 'immigration', 'alcohol misuse' and 'drug misuse'.

The possible causes of homelessness which respondents felt deserved highest priority for housing were often not the same as the groups respondents dealt with most often. For example, 85% of respondents included 'domestic violence' as one of the four possible causes of homelessness which should get highest priority for housing yet just 12% of respondents indicated that people experiencing 'domestic abuse' were among the three groups they dealt with most often. Conversely, while 42% of respondents selected 'people with addictions' as one of the three groups they dealt with most often, 'alcohol misuse' and 'drug misuse' were rarely selected as causes of homelessness which should be awarded priority for housing (4% or 8 respondents selecting 'alcohol misuse' and 2% or 5 respondents selecting 'drug misuse').

It is important to note that the options given were not mutually exclusive. Respondents may have considered that, for example, alcohol or drug misuse was likely often to be a side issue of, for example, a mental health issue. It was highlighted by participants at follow-up discussions that drug and alcohol problems were commonly considered to be a side issue masking other difficulties and participants considered that this understanding may account for the infrequent selection of these causes. There was also some indication that some respondents may have found it hard to prioritise needs, either believing that all should be given priority, or that each case had to be considered individually. In the 120 additional comments made in relation to questions which explored issues around prioritisation, it is possible to detect several common themes. In explaining the basis on which respondents prioritised housing need, vulnerability was most often mentioned. The degree of stability that would be achieved for vulnerable individuals and the higher social impact that rehousing such individuals would potentially have were both indicated as reasons for prioritising vulnerable groups.

Intentionality appeared to be an important criterion for respondents in prioritising between different groups, with those who were seen to be at risk of homelessness 'through no fault of their own' being accorded higher priority. Not all respondents supported this view, however, and there was some discussion of the need for appropriate support to be in place to help a household maintain accommodation, and also a recognition that prioritising all homeless applicants was the only way of meeting targets. Overall it appears that the current vulnerable and priority need categories were influential in shaping the way respondents thought about need.

When asked directly about how they would prioritise between intentionally and unintentionally homeless households and others with housing need, respondents clearly placed the groups in the following order (highest priority first): unintentionally homeless, on housing waiting list, on transfer list, intentionally homeless.

Participants in the follow-up groups highlighted the interplay between choice and prioritisation in a context of resource constraints. Therefore while participants agreed that homeless households should have the same choice about where they live as non-homeless households in an ideal situation, in reality it was recognised that choice was often constrained or limited by local considerations. This sentiment was also evident in free text responses, with the majority of comments indicating that equal choice would only be available in an ideal world and that current resources did not enable such practice.

Balancing housing need

Three quarters (75%) of respondents agreed that they were housing increasing numbers of homeless people at the expense of others on the waiting list who have a recognised need. While the majority of respondents indicated that unintentionally homeless households should be given priority over other housing need, this suggests some unease about the impact on others in housing need of prioritising homeless households.

Respondents from the RSL sector were more likely to agree that they were housing increasing numbers of homeless people at the expense of others in housing need than local authority respondents (88% compared to 77%).

The neighbourhood

Sixty two per cent of those who responded agreed that they 'had estates/neighbourhoods where the current tenants would react badly to a homeless person or family moving in'. There was some difference between responses from RSLs and local authorities to this question. While 63% of local authority respondents agreed with the statement, 65% of RSL respondents did not agree. RSL respondents were also more likely to 'completely disagree' than local authority respondents: 25% of RSL respondents 'completely disagreed' compared to 9% of local authority respondents. Local authority respondents from urban areas were more likely to disagree with this statement than those from rural areas (with 40% disagreeing to some extent compared to 26% in rural areas).

While the majority of respondents agreed that they had estates or neighbourhoods where the existing tenants may react badly to a homeless person or family moving in, responses to a separate question suggested that the views of tenants/neighbourhoods were not a significant influence on service provision. The 'views of other tenants/the neighbourhood' were least often ranked as one of the four most important factors in considering a homeless household for a vacancy.

The extent to which local authority respondents felt that they had 'estates/neighbourhoods where current tenants would react badly to a homeless person or family moving in' was correlated with how much they agreed that 'ensuring balanced communities is becoming more difficult as the number of homeless cases increases'. If they agreed that they had existing tenants who would react badly, they were more likely to agree that ensuring balanced communities was becoming more difficult, and the more strongly they agreed in the first case, they more strongly they agreed in the

second. Conversely, the more strongly they disagreed that they had existing tenants who would react badly, the more strongly they disagreed that ensuring balanced communities was becoming more difficult.

Achieving balanced communities

Nearly three quarters (74%) of respondents agreed that ensuring 'balanced communities' is becoming more difficult as the number of homeless cases increases: again, RSLs were more in agreement with this statement than local authority respondents (88% and 70% respectively). Discussion at follow-up groups suggested that the concept of 'balanced communities' was a complex one and that it did not equate to static communities. It was also suggested that private housing estates were less likely to be 'balanced communities' as they 'do not cater for all parts of society'.

Local authority respondents agreed more strongly that 'ensuring "balanced communities" is becoming more difficult as the number of homeless cases increases' if they did not think the suspension of local connection is fair than if they did.

The high positive response to the question on the difficulty of ensuring balanced communities does, however, seem to suggest that many respondents equated difficulties with ensuring balanced communities with an increasing number of homeless cases.

Respect

Respondents were asked about the extent to which they felt their job was respected by other people. For each of seven groups listed, respondents were asked to select one of three options: 'respected', 'not respected' or 'neither'. Respondents were most likely to say that their job was respected by 'colleagues', followed by 'friends/relatives' and 'partner organisations'. Two thirds of respondents felt that their job was respected by 'senior staff' and just over half (55%) felt that their job was respected by 'homeless clients'.

Although for each of the groups listed, there were some respondents who felt that their jobs were 'not respected', numbers were relatively small in all cases. Respondents were more likely to select the 'neither' option, and for 'elected/committee members' and 'other clients' a significant proportion (43% and 45% respectively) selected this option. The group most often thought not to respect respondents' jobs were 'elected/committee members' (14%). Looking at the sector breakdown for this group only, 29 local authority respondents (20%) reported that they did not feel their job was respected by this group, compared to 6 (12%) voluntary sector respondents and one RSL respondent. Local authority respondents were also more likely to report feeling less

respected by 'other clients' (22 respondents (15% compared to one RSL respondent and no voluntary sector respondents). Both these results may in part reflect the relative importance of these two groups to the different sectors.

Comments made by participants during follow-up discussions suggested that the involvement of elected members in particular cases was often seen to be unhelpful, though other participants acknowledged the support they had received from, and pressures experienced by, elected members. Overall it was noted that greater trust was required between practitioners and elected members if the various aspects of the Executive's priorities were to be achieved.

Abuse

Levels of abuse experienced by staff from clients were high, with just under half (49%) of respondents reporting that they either 'sometimes' (39%) or 'regularly' (10%) suffered abuse from clients while carrying out their duties. This figure was highest in local authorities (59%) followed by RSLs (38%) and voluntary sector (30%). Only 11% of local authority respondents stated that they 'never' suffered abuse from clients while carrying out their duties.

Experience of abuse did not appear to have any impact on whether or not respondents felt homeless households should have the same choice about where they lived as other households in housing need, nor about whether those who could have avoided becoming homeless should expect the same degree of choice as others in need of rehousing.

In follow up discussions, it was noted that presentation to a homeless service was often considered to be a last resort, often not only by homeless households, but also by other agencies. At the point a presentation is made, therefore, clients often feel that the options available to them are very limited, giving rise to a 'feeling of last resort' and placing them under increased emotional stress. Abuse in these circumstances was thought to be more likely due to increased frustration, especially by those with higher support needs. Respondents felt clear that recognising particular difficulties associated with working with people experiencing homelessness and managing these so as to prevent abusive situations, or defuse them, required both enhanced staff skills and a conducive organisational culture.

Others' views and opinions

Whose opinions matter?

For the majority of respondents, the opinions of homeless clients were the most important to consider when delivering

services to homeless people – 81% responded that their opinions were ‘significantly important’. Sixty per cent of respondents felt that colleagues’ opinions were ‘significantly important’, and 52% thought this of senior staff. The largest proportions of ‘minimally important’ responses were given to ‘friends/relatives’ (38%) and ‘elected/committee members’ (21%). These groups also had the largest percentage of responses for ‘not applicable’ (30% and 14% respectively – joint with ‘other clients’).

Public interest

Only 11% of respondents disagreed with the statement that ‘the public are generally not interested in homeless issues unless they are directly affected’ and 72% of respondents agreed that their job would be easier ‘if the public knew better the extent of homelessness and how people can find themselves affected by it’.

The media

The media was raised in discussions as an unhelpful influence on attitudes towards homeless people, which via its influence on local elected politicians and constituents could negatively impact upon service provision. It was also seen to shape to some extent the context in which service providers could operate and constrain the accepted parameters in which they worked. Participants commented that awareness raising for both elected members and the general public would be helpful in this respect.

Joint working/partnership

Over three quarters (79%) of respondents felt that a good relationship existed between the local authority and other service providers and that this helped to provide relevant and responsive services to homeless households. Local authority respondents were most positive about their relationships with other service providers (with 84% agreeing) while voluntary sector respondents were least positive, though over two thirds (69%) were still in agreement. Eighty per cent of all respondents agreed that their organisation had sufficient agreements and procedures in place to enable them to work jointly with other services. Half (50%) of all respondents felt that the opinions of partner organisations were significantly important for them to consider when delivering services to homeless people.

Despite these positive responses to the survey questions, participants at follow-up groups suggested that there is room for a greater involvement from housing staff outwith Homeless Teams and from other public sector professions. Along these lines, participants would welcome a higher priority for preventative work and a more holistic approach to this, as well as a greater commitment to corporate

responsibility for homelessness. They also felt there was a need to raise the awareness of homelessness among other professions and to ensure that it was tackled in the health, social care, education and employment fields.

Other suggestions around joint working included a higher priority for single shared assessment to play a central role in the development of processes for homeless clients, and the establishment of local practice exchange networks to enable organisations to have a partnership approach at all levels. It was suggested that these network groups should be open to staff working in a variety of posts within local authorities, including homelessness, housing management and allocations, as well as to RSL officers and support workers. Exchange networks would create a space for members to discuss local issues and develop local solutions, and would complement the existing Scottish Housing Best Value Network (SHBVN).

Section 5 referrals

Three quarters (75%) of respondents felt they understood what Section 5 referrals were and how they worked. RSL respondents were most confident with nearly all (94%) answering this question positively. Over three quarters (79%) of local authority respondents also felt they understood Section 5 referrals. Voluntary sector respondents were least confident, though nearly two thirds (61%) still felt they understood what they were and how they worked. It is perhaps unsurprising that voluntary sector respondents would have the least understanding of this issue as they are least likely to come into contact with it.

Recommendations

Expanding responsibility, ownership and joint working:

Increasing corporate responsibility, expanding ownership of the homelessness agenda to other professions and developing opportunities for joint training and networking were identified as areas for future action during the course of research. The following recommendations are made in this respect:

1. Joint training of practitioners in different disciplines should be encouraged and facilitated to break down barriers and help ensure that homelessness is recognised as a corporate duty.
2. Local practice exchange networks should be established to enable organisations to have a partnership approach at the local level. These would complement the SHBVN local practice exchange networks but would create new networking opportunities, especially for front line staff. They

could also facilitate joint training to increase knowledge-sharing between disciplines and provide opportunities for people from different disciplines to learn about each others' work.

3. Elected members and management committee members from RSLs and the voluntary sector should be asked to participate in an event to raise awareness of their corporate responsibilities to tackle issues that are cross departmental.

Public awareness and understanding of homelessness:

This research has not found that the attitudes of the general public have a strong, direct influence on the way in which respondents provided services to those experiencing homelessness. It did find, however, that service providers felt that the general public would not be interested in homelessness unless directly affected by it, and that their jobs would be easier if the public had a better awareness. It is therefore recommended that:

4. A general public attitudes survey should be conducted to gauge the level of awareness of homelessness amongst the general public and to explore knowledge and views in this area.

Service provision to Black and Minority Ethnic Households

While over half the respondents to this survey indicated that their client group included members from black and minority ethnic households, 48% of respondents did not indicate this. It was suggested that, especially in areas with a smaller black and minority ethnic population, there may be a lack of knowledge and understanding about the needs of these individuals. It is therefore recommended that:

5. Work in relation to practitioners' knowledge and understanding of BME issues should be incorporated into any specific research as indicated in Homelessness Task Force recommendations. Further guidance could be issued by the Executive to consider how to raise awareness of BME specific needs amongst practitioners.

Guidance and standards

The great majority of respondents felt that their organisation had sufficient policies and procedures in place which helped them effectively assist people experiencing homelessness. It was felt, however, that more or improved guidance and promotion of standards could be helpful in certain areas. It is therefore recommended that:

6. The Scottish Executive should review the Code of Guidance to make it more illustrative and/or link to more specific projects/initiatives across Scotland. Consideration should be given to the possibility of making it available as an interactive document which could be more easily updated. This should be as accessible for front line officers as senior managers and homelessness strategy staff.
7. The Scottish Executive should establish a national post to support local authorities towards achieving the 2012 target. The post holder would concentrate on prevention and identifying good practice and supporting informal networks.
8. Housing providers should ensure that the Homepoint standards are promoted in their area and that their staff are trained accordingly as better advice and information will improve choice.

If you wish further copies of this Research Findings or have any enquiries about social research, please contact us at:

Scottish Executive Social Research
1-F (Dockside)
Victoria Quay
EDINBURGH
EH6 6QQ
Tel: 0131 244 0874
Fax: 0131 244 7573
Email: socialresearch@scotland.gsi.gov.uk
Website: www.scotland.gov.uk/socialresearch

This document (and other Research Findings and Reports) and information about social research in the Scottish Executive may be viewed on the Internet at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/socialresearch>

The site carries up-to-date information about social and policy research commissioned and published on behalf of the Scottish Executive. Subjects covered include transport, housing, social inclusion, rural affairs, children and young people, education, social work, community care, local government, civil justice, crime and criminal justice, regeneration, planning and women's issues. The site also allows access to information about the Scottish Household Survey.