

Young homeless people and the keys to successful resettlement

Abstract

Resettlement support has been increasingly recognised as a key factor in overcoming homelessness. Research carried out in a hostel for single homeless young people, found that there were a number of critical factors which lead to successful resettlement of young homeless people. Young people were able to move into tenancies in the social rented sector with suitable resettlement support, notably the help of a resettlement support worker. This paper argues that the role of social housing providers was also key to this resettlement process. Young people needed to be allocated move on accommodation at a critically timed point in the resettlement process when motivation and key skills had been achieved. Lack of immediate access to social rented tenancies resulted in a lengthened stay in the hostel where young people risked becoming part of a “hostel community” or subculture. Social housing providers also had a further important role in facilitating the resettlement process by providing supported housing. Specialised housing schemes represented resettlement from the hostel sector for those young people unable to take an independent tenancy. Successful resettlement was the result of positive working relationships between social housing providers, resettlement and hostel staff and motivation of the young person to move on from the hostel. Without these key factors, resettlement was less likely to succeed.

Introduction

What is resettlement?

In academic writing there has been little to define the use of the term resettlement. The understanding of the term has been clouded by the use of the term in a number of different fields of social care with it being used to refer to the resettlement of asylum seekers as well as those leaving long term institutional care. Further to this, the term resettlement has also been used to describe larger direct access, government funded hostels aimed at resettling rough sleepers. Despite these difficulties a working definition for housing practitioners can be drawn from Bevan (1998) who states

“resettlement is a discreet area of work from generalist hostel work, from counselling, keyworking, from outreach and from long term tenancy support work. It does link in with these area of work but it needs to be understood as separate from them” (p1)

The complexities of homelessness and the need for resettlement

The recognition that homelessness is a multi faceted problem has been well noted by a considerable amount of research (Evans 1996; Smith et al 1996; O’Callaghan and Dominian 1996; Lemos 1999; Anderson and Tulloch, 2000). In effect, overcoming homelessness becomes a wider issue than just finding accommodation. Homelessness can be caused by a number of factors including family breakdown, alcohol or drug misuse, eviction, or mental and physical health problems to name a few (Lemos, 1999). For each individual such difficulties can make it more complex to resettle into their own accommodation. This also can be compounded by the difficulties inherent in staying in temporary accommodation such as a hostel. Whilst most hostels have now moved on from the old workhouse accommodation, the institutional nature of some hostel accommodation can act as stumbling block rather than a stepping-stone for these wanting to resettle into the community. For example hostel residents in this research did not have utility bills to pay and were provided with one meal per day for a small service charge. In effect, this could make it more difficult for those wanting to move into independent accommodation. One hostel worker described this process as the “easy living of the hostel” where there was less necessity to practice life skills needed in independent accommodation. Galchagan and Wallace (2001) suggests that before a person can be resettled a lengthy process of becoming unsettled may of occurred which leads to a person being homeless and in temporary accommodation. They also point out that when a person says that they have been homeless for a few months this often means that they have been homeless, settled, homeless and settled a number of times. Thus they argue that “[h]omelessness is therefore a revolving door process” (p2). This process is represented in figure 1.

Figure 1

The concept of homelessness being a cyclical process has only recently been acknowledged by policy makers. The Homelessness Directorate (ODPM, 2002) highlights that there is little information on the extent of repeat homelessness yet figures from some local authorities have estimated that it could be as high as 20 or 30 per cent of cases who present themselves to the local authority.

Resettlement aims to help break this merry-go round effect, offer support and empower people to draw on their own skills and knowledge to make their

accommodation a success. Without support, Schofield (1999) suggests that certain groups (such as those with mental health problems) with end up back in this revolving door. Schofield goes on to argue that not only is this a “crushing blow” (p3) to the hopes and aspirations of a homeless person but it also incurs an incredible cost imposed by tenancy failure and extra time spent in temporary accommodation, which is inevitably more expensive than an independent tenancy.

The origins and nature of the research

This research was carried out at a hostel for young people in Liverpool. The hostel offered temporary accommodation for those aged 16 to 30 with 24-hour staff support. In 1998 the hostel set up a resettlement service with the aid of funding from the Comino Foundation who also sponsored this research. Both the hostel management and staff recognised that they were attempting to move residents on from the hostel into their own tenancies yet many of these residents would then represent at the hostel, often after only a short space of time. This was because their tenancy had failed. Staff pointed out that many ex residents felt lonely and lacked the skills to be able to hold down their own accommodation. It was decided that a new worker would be used to set up a resettlement service that would be able to support young people through the process of moving out of the hostel and beyond. The remit of the resettlement service was to assist hostel residents to move out of the hostel into longer-term accommodation by finding accommodation offered by the local authority and Registered Social Landlords (RSLs). At the time of the research, 29 young people had been moved into their own accommodation through the resettlement service.

The research aimed to evaluate how the resettlement service at the hostel was functioning. It did this by carrying out qualitative interviews with three groups of people, current hostel residents, hostel staff including resettlement staff and ex residents of the hostel who were now living independently. All the interviews were semi structured in nature. All participants were asked questions about the resettlement process. The young people involved were also asked about their housing histories, their experiences of using resettlement services and their future plans for housing.

The model of resettlement

The model of resettlement used at the hostel followed a number of different stages.

- ❖ The young person would be referred to the hostel by another agency. As this was a non direct access hostel, young people could not self present to the hostel. The young person would be interviewed to see if they were suitable to come and live in the project. If the young person was accepted, it was at this point that they were told about the resettlement service.

- ❖ A support package was then put together with one of the support workers at the hostel. Since most of the residents in the hostel were often lacking in both education and life skills, the plan was generally based around these two factors which were thought important to help enable a young person to move out. Regular meetings with the support worker would then take place to monitor the person's progress along their support plan.

- ❖ At an appropriate time 'move on' was discussed. On average support workers in the hostel described that this took around two months. During this time support workers stated that they were able to make an assessment of a resident's support needs. From this they were able to ascertain what type of housing would most suit the young person when they were ready to move out. All available options were discussed with the young person. The accommodation routes open to the residents fell into three main categories.

Independent Accommodation

If the resident wanted and was thought to be able to cope with independent accommodation, the young person was referred to the resettlement service. This only happened if the young person had adhered to the support plan that had been put together with their support worker and the support worker foresaw that this person would be able to take on the responsibility of an independent tenancy. A referral to the resettlement worker would then take place. The resettlement worker would then

assist the young person to apply accommodation via waiting lists in the social rented sector. If an independent tenancy was achieved then the resettlement worker would help the young person move in to the accommodation as set up home. This would include helping the young person fill out any appropriate benefit forms, decorating the accommodation and accompanying them to purchase major items of furniture. After the initial moving in period, the resettlement worker would then carry out support visits as frequently as needed by the young person.

Supported Accommodation

If the young person had high support needs or was seen as vulnerable in some way (eg most of those between 16 and 18 were seen to be vulnerable due to age), the young person's support worker would attempt to find alternative accommodation for the young person. This was generally through a number of supported housing schemes in the area personally known to the support worker. A mixture of RSLs and charities ran such projects. The knowledge of such projects depended on experience and personal contacts that the support worker had built up over time.

Other hostel accommodation

Some young people were asked to leave the hostel. This might be for breach of a licence agreement. In such circumstances staff described that young people would then move on to other hostel or temporary accommodation. Young people might also choose to move from the hostel to other hostel accommodation.

The resettlement service had been very successful in finding accommodation for a number of young people. Of those who had been resettled none had represented at the hostel (however this does not guarantee that they had not presented at another hostel). A number had moved on again since they were initially rehoused but were still maintaining their accommodation. At the time of the research the resettlement worker was supporting five young people who had moved into the community. The worker offered both emotional and practical support to these service users.

Key Findings

Relationship with housing providers

One important aspect of the work that the resettlement worker carried out at the hostel was finding people 'move on' accommodation. As few of the young people who came into the hostel would have priority need for housing (most being single without dependants) the local authority had no duty to find many of the residents permanent rehousing. Therefore in order to find move on accommodation the residents of the hostel had little choice but to join the waiting list of the major housing providers that operated in the city. Whilst the resettlement worker, with the support of hostel management, had actively pursued meetings with the main housing providers in order to ensure positive working relationships and improve provision, of housing out of ten housing associations contacted with a view to setting up nomination agreements to properties only two housing associations had agreed to nomination agreements. This had given nomination rights to a total of four properties each year.

Whilst such agreement were viewed as positive, due to the limited number of allocated nominations, only four per year, the rationale on deciding which young person would be moved into the accommodation was based on the judgement of the resettlement worker. Such judgement was made considering the following factors:

- ❖ The best behaved would be rewarded. The young people who were given one of these tenancies tended to be those who had been highly motivated, adhered to his/her personal support plan as well as not breaching the hostel licence agreement.
- ❖ There was a clear need for the tenancy to succeed to ensure the nomination agreement were upheld. The hostel wanted the young person's tenancy to succeed in order that they did not lose the nomination agreement.
- ❖ Because the agreements with the housing associations were not legally binding but based on good will between the hostel and the housing association, this may have influenced the type of tenant chosen

The service had been set up for 18 months had helped 29 people to find more permanent accommodation. Demand therefore outstripped supply. The resettlement worker was forced to use a rationing process to offer these nominations. Those who were viewed by the worker to be a good tenant or have been a tenant before were thought to be a little more reliable were likely to be considered for one of the properties through the nomination agreements. In effect this could leave those thought to be a more risky tenant to wait longer for a nomination from a normal waiting list. Even when a property was accessed through nominations there seemed an extra responsibility placed on the resettlement worker to ensure that the tenancy succeeded. There was an overall fear that the rights to priority to properties was a measure of good will rather than an obligation. If ex residents did default then there was a risk that the nomination rights could be withdrawn.

Motivation of Young People

For many young people who came to live in the hostel the process of resettlement was a complex process which could take a number of months to work through. For support workers in the hostel, an important aspect of their role was to keep motivation to move out of the hostel to an optimum. Some workers pointed out that it was easy for a young person to lose their motivation once they had entered the hostel. This might include the motivation to go to college or work, or to spend their time or money wisely.

To work through a process which would lead to resettlement for some young people was a success in itself. This meant that they had managed to overcome some of the external pressures on them. These included not partaking in what Allen refers to as the 'nightclub culture' of hostels. This can be described as desire for young people to go out socialising with other residents in the hostel all night and stay in the hostel all day. Once a high level of motivation had been achieved, staff recognised that young people wanted what can only be termed a reward for their work. In this particular case the reward was being able to access a property in an area in which they wanted to live with relative ease.

However as discussed above many young people had to join a waiting list with an RSL or alternative housing project and could not immediately access ‘move on’ accommodation. They may have to wait a number of months until a property became available in an area of choice. An important aim of resettlement is to try and resettle a person in an area that they choose. This means that when a person moves into independent accommodation they might be familiar with the surroundings and/or have family or friends in the area thus making the process of settling easier. For this reason young people going through resettlement were encouraged to choose areas with which they were familiar. At the same time, this had the effect of increasing waiting times for those young people who chose high demand areas. Many young people found that having to wait a significant amount of time for a property had a significant demotivating effect. One staff member described this process.

“A lot of it is a delay in moving out [of the hostel] and a lot of it is down to the young person thinking hang on what have I got? I’ve done all this and I’m still [living] here” (Hostel Support Worker, three years).

The process of resettlement relies on the interplay of a young person’s motivation and the availability of accommodation from a housing provider. A young person needed to be motivated to move out of the hostel and have independent accommodation for the process to be successful. The second important factor is the role of the housing provider. There needs to be an availability of accommodation in order a young person can move on when he/she is ready. Without ‘move on’ accommodation there is a risk residents may regress in progress on their support plan and lose their opportunity to move out of the hostel. Thus the timing of this whole process resettlement process is key.

Questioning the model of resettlement

This paper has discussed how the role of social housing providers and motivation have been key factors in the resettlement process. For some young people moving into independent accommodation was the only way that they perceived that they could be resettled. Some support staff also held a similar perception about resettlement and a young person could only achieve housing success through a planned process of

resettlement. The internal processes within the hostel illustrated this. Only those young people who were seen by the hostel support staff to be able to complete the programme of resettlement were referred to the resettlement officer in the hostel. In doing this the staff accepted the model of resettlement described above as *the* approach that young people could take to be able move out of the hostel sector in order to live a more settled way of life.

However it became evident that not all young people were going to be able or want to move along this process. The young people in the sample had a diverse set of future goals which affected where they wished to live. Although none expressed that they wished to stay in the hostel sector, a number stated that they wished to travel, another wanted to join the army and a further young person stated he was hoping to move to a supported lodgings scheme. For each of these, taking a step out of the hostel sector would also represent resettlement even though their aim might not be to move to independent accommodation. However these young people were not referred to the resettlement service but followed the advice and guidance of their hostel support worker to find further suitable accommodation. In effect the internal processes and understanding of resettlement meant that only those seen as able to move into independent accommodation would get support in future accommodation from the resettlement worker.

Understanding resettlement through this narrow definition had a number of subsequent consequences. Firstly it meant that those moving into other types of accommodation might not have the opportunity to gain all the skills necessary for living in accommodation other than a hostel. For example the resettlement worker ran group sessions to improve living skills for all those referred to the service for independent living. Such skills may be needed by any of the young people leaving the accommodation for other types of accommodation. Secondly young people moving to other housing projects (such as semi supported) might still need the help of a resettlement worker when they move out of the hostel. This might be to assist with the practicalities of moving to a new home as well as offering emotional support until the person felt settled in the new project. Resettlement needs to be understood as a service to assist any type of 'move on' into more settled accommodation and offering any type of support that can help achieve this along this process.

Conclusion

This research illustrates that the support of resettlement work often leads to positive housing outcomes for groups that have in the past been at risk of falling into the cyclical process of homelessness. The relationship with housing providers is a critical one in the process of resettlement. For positive resettlement to take place there needs to be some prioritised access to properties for people who are living in temporary accommodation but who are not prioritised for housing by the local authority. However, it is understandable that housing providers may not want to take on risky tenants, yet without the opportunity of an independent tenancy with the appropriate support, some young people may find themselves locked into temporary accommodation.

For some young people other factors also make it more difficult for them to be able to move out of the hostel. A significant proportion of the young people in the hostel had been looked after by the local authority or had been asked to leave the family home because of relationship breakdown. For many such experiences dented self esteem and motivation. For such young people the resettlement process may be longer and more complex as personal issues may need to be resolved before 'move-on' can be considered. Peer pressure to partake in the 'nightclub culture' of the hostel also had a notable demotivating effect, making the process of transition to independent living more difficult. 'Move on' housing needs to be available in order that young people are able to achieve resettlement when motivation is at an optimum thus minimising the risk of a young person being attracted to hostel living. Moreover housing providers may also have an important role in providing different types of accommodation to this client group. The evidence suggests that for some young people they will continue to need to live in some type of supported accommodation. This may give the best opportunity for young people to work towards independent living. In drawing this conclusion this also questions the assumptions on which the model of resettlement in the hostel were based. Resettlement does not necessarily mean that a homeless person will have taken a complete move to independent living but will have taken one step along the process. This in itself can represent resettlement. The focus of resettlement therefore needs to be based on the best

manner in which support can be given to move out of the hostel sector rather than the larger focus of gaining independent tenancies.

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