Shelter at the Margins:
New Labour and the changing state of emergency accommodation for single homeless people in Britain

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Abstract

In Britain, responsibility for the provision of emergency accommodation for single homeless people has historically fallen to the voluntary sector. Responding to continuing concerns about unevenness in the supply and quality of such accommodation, New Labour have considerably increased the funding available to the sector and imposed tighter regulations upon the voluntary organisations providing such services. Drawing on the first national survey of emergency accommodation projects operating in England, Wales and Scotland the paper reports on the effect of these initiatives. The survey reveals that they have had far less impact than might be imagined. The supply of emergency accommodation in Britain remains markedly uneven, and the quality of accommodation and care provided by some voluntary organisations a cause of serious concern.
Introduction

In Britain, responsibility for the provision of emergency accommodation for single homeless people has historically fallen to the voluntary sector (Saunders, 1986). Having occupied a peripheral position in British homelessness policy for many years, in the 1990s voluntary sector organisations found themselves cast centre stage in attempts to ameliorate a crisis of street homelessness (Anderson, 1993). Under New Labour in particular, significant new resource has been made available to the sector in an attempt to boost the supply of such accommodation. Attempts have also been made to counter long standing problems regarding the uneven quality of accommodation through enhanced monitoring and regulation of the sector by local and central government.

With levels of rough sleeping declining, the attention of government and of pressure groups has recently shifted again: turning away from the problems of rough sleeping towards a consideration of hidden homelessness (CRISIS, 2004; NAO, 2005). Yet very little is known about the nature of the emergency accommodation available to those sleeping rough, or about the impact of recent attempts to improve the supply and quality of such accommodation (Van Doorn and Williamson, 2001).

This paper aims to fill this gap. Reporting on the first national survey of emergency accommodation projects operating in England, Wales and Scotland (outside of London) the paper shows that the impact of recent government initiatives has been far less significant than might be imagined. As a result both the supply and quality of the emergency accommodation and care provided to single homeless people by Britain’s voluntary sector organisations remains highly uneven.
The paper is in three parts. In the opening sections we chart the changing position of the voluntary sector organisations providing emergency accommodation in British homelessness and welfare policy, and note some of the more important changes to the sector itself over recent decades. In the middle parts of the paper we report on the findings of the survey and supporting in-depth interviews. In the conclusion we reflect on the future role of the voluntary sector in this field and outline some of the key issues still facing the sector.

At the margins of welfare policy and provision

The history of emergency accommodation provision for single homeless people runs counter to conventional accounts of the development of British welfare (c.f. Richards and Smith, 2002). Certainly, rather than picking up the mantle of service provision as the age of ‘government’ (1947 to the mid-1970s) unfolded, the post-war years saw little direct intervention by either local or central government in the welfare needs of single homeless people. Instead, with the attention of homeless advocacy groups and government focused mainly on the needs of homeless families at this time (Pleave and Quilgars, 2003), for single homeless people the 1960s’ and ‘70s are better characterised as an era of ‘malign neglect’ (Wolch and Dear, 1993). Widely perceived as ‘undeserving’ of the protection afforded those with dependants, successive administrations continued to abdicate responsibility for the provision of accommodation and care for single homeless people to the voluntary sector. The majority of night shelters and hostels provided by voluntary organisations at this time were extremely basic and, though indirectly subsidised by the state via benefit
transfers, remained largely outside central or local government regulation (Stewart, 1975).

Through the late 1970s and early 1980s levels of street homelessness rose and the characteristics of Britain’s single homeless population changed. With rising numbers of young people and women sleeping rough, single homeless people became the focus of growing public sympathy (Hutson and Liddiard, 1994). Responding to the needs of a changing single homeless population at this time, a number of new voluntary organisations emerged to supplement the work of traditional providers. For such organisations, single homelessness came to be understood as a ‘housing plus’ issue. In contrast to the austere conditions found in hostels provided by groups like the Salvation Army, newer organisations offered much improved accommodation and support to their residents (Foord et al, 1998). Spurred on by the publication of the Wolfendon Report (which encouraged the sector more widely to begin thinking of itself as a ‘sector’ rather than only a loose affiliation of voluntary organisations) umbrella organisations began to disseminate examples of good practice: lobbying traditional providers to embark upon a refurbishment of their larger hostels, calling for the use of paid rather than volunteer staff, and providing training and support for hostel managers and workers (CHAR, 1985; Harris et al, 2001).

As a result of these efforts, by the early 1990s Britain’s emergency hostels were in much better shape than they had been twenty years earlier – catering to a wider range of clients, employing paid rather than volunteer staff, and providing much higher levels of support (Warrington, 1997). None-the-less, concerns remained about the uneven quality of such accommodation. Amongst the newly improved hostels there
remained a significant number of much more basic night shelters, many of which continued to rely on (untrained) volunteer staff (Harrison, 1996). Co-ordination across the sector, and between the various statutory and non-statutory organisations working with single homeless people, was also poor, whilst outside of London in particular the demand for emergency beds was so acute that the sector was barely able to cope (Brown et al, 1996; Ham and Carter, 1996, p3).

Yet, whilst numerous studies pointed to continued short-comings in the voluntary response to the problems of single homelessness and rough sleeping at this time, there remained little indication that the state might finally pick up the mantle of provision itself, or seek to ameliorate concerns about the unevenness of the voluntary response through enhanced regulation and funding. Most obviously, though in June 1990 the then Conservative government finally launched its *Rough Sleepers Initiative (RSI)* 1990-1997, the initiative continued to look to the voluntary sector rather than local or central government to provide the accommodation and care needed by those sleeping rough. More notably, focused mainly on central London, the *RSI* did little to stimulate the supply of accommodation beyond the capital. Nor did it address concerns about unevenness in the quality of accommodation available to single homeless people (Randall and Brown, 1993, 1996). Whilst in-line with a Managerialist approach organisations bidding for *RSI* monies had to demonstrate basic value-for-money, for example, funding agreements included nothing about staff training, the use of volunteer staff, or the minimum standards of accommodation organisations had to offer their residents.
**New Labour and the restructuring of the voluntary response**

In retrospect, the *Rough Sleepers Initiative* can best be seen as articulating broader Neo-Conservative thinking around the minimalist state. In stark contrast, New Labour have set about transforming the relationships between central government and the voluntary sector organisations providing the mainstay of accommodation and care to single homeless people: part and parcel of a broader transformation of the relationship between the state and the voluntary sector ushered in by New Labour (Powell, 2003). Based upon a concept of ‘partnership’, New Labour’s Compacts with the Voluntary Sector have been described by Kendall (2000: 542) as “an unparalleled step in the positioning of the third sector in [British] public policy”. Within such a vision, voluntary sector organisations continue to take responsibility for the delivery of an increasing array of welfare services. But, far from receding, the state’s role too has expanded – with central government, rather than quasi-governmental organisations, taking the lead role in the design of welfare policy, and the local state (re)assuming responsibility for the funding and monitoring of front-line providers (Morrison, 2000).

To facilitate this new vision, New Labour has set about transforming the technologies of welfare delivery. Most importantly, perhaps, with the introduction of *Best Value*, and associated performance targets, New Labour have sought to exert much greater control over the ways in which ‘partner’ agencies in the voluntary sector deliver welfare services (Ling, 2000). At the same time, day-to-day responsibilities for the commissioning, funding and monitoring of welfare services has passed (back) to the local state. Given the extent to which *Best Value* and *Supporting People* determine the commissioning and regulatory framework, it is difficult to read such a move as evidence of genuine de-centralisation. Rather, we appear to be witnessing a re-
centralisation and formalisation of state power - within which, as Maile and Hoggett (2001: 512) argue, “local government is increasingly becoming a ‘policy free zone’” and Britain’s voluntary sector an arm of the ‘shadow state’ (Wolch, 1990).

Within this broader context, the delivery of emergency accommodation and care to single homeless people has, on the face of it at least, also been transformed (May et al, 2005). Given its pledge to tackle wider problems of social exclusion, it is perhaps no surprise that problems of rough sleeping were soon accorded a high priority by the incoming New Labour government (Fitzpatrick et al, 2000). Even so, the energy directed towards tackling the problem has been impressive. Immediately on gaining office, for example, New Labour announced the formation of a new unit dedicated to tackling the problems of rough sleeping (the Rough Sleepers Unit, subsequently incorporated in to a new Homelessness Directorate), an extension of the previous administration’s Rough Sleepers Initiative (1997-9) and the launch of its own Homelessness Action Programme (HAP) 1999-2002.

Under HAP New Labour significantly increased the funding available to voluntary sector organisations providing emergency accommodation and care for people sleeping rough outside of London: releasing £134 million over a three year period to projects in 113 towns and cities across England, Wales and Scotland (Randall and Brown, 2002). More significantly, in an attempt finally to counter the uneven quality that has dogged the sector for so long, new contracts drawn up under a system of Best Value sought to correct the shortcomings of the RSI by imposing far stricter conditions upon agencies bidding for HAP monies. Here attention shifted from a focus on simple value-for-money, to a much closer concern with modes of service
delivery. Most notably, though still not imposing conditions on the form of accommodation that could be offered to homeless people, agencies bidding for HAP funding were required to demonstrate their active engagement with other organisations working with single homeless people in their local area (through membership of local ‘street service consortia’, for example) and the existence of suitable outreach and resettlement programmes (DETR, 2000). Underpinning the new contracts, participating agencies also found themselves facing strict performance targets, requiring them to demonstrate a reduction in levels of rough sleeping (assessed via repeated street counts) and of a measurable through-put of clients in to move-on accommodation.

With hindsight, HAP appears as only the first step in the move towards a new and more coherent national framework for the delivery of emergency accommodation and related services to single homeless people introduced by New Labour. As a further step along that path, in July 2003 local authorities were charged with the task of drawing up comprehensive Single Homelessness Strategies. Though still turning to the voluntary sector to deliver such services, for the first time local authorities found themselves with a statutory duty to liase with voluntary sector organisations operating in their jurisdiction to ensure a sufficient supply of emergency accommodation for single homeless people in their area (NAO, 2005). At the same time, the introduction of Supporting People has changed the main funding mechanism relating to the provision of emergency accommodation and given local authorities increased powers over providers operating in their area. Where in the past a core component of an agency’s funding was provided direct from central government via the Housing Benefits system, from 2003 the care component of operations is funded via local
authorities through Supporting People. Consolidating moves towards the tighter regulation of voluntary sector organisations introduced under HAP, the programme’s Quality Assessment Framework provides a mechanism through which local authorities can monitor the performance, quality and value for money of the hostels and night shelters funded through the programme (Van Doorn and Kane, 2003). Finally, in a further attempt to improve the quality of service offered by voluntary sector organisations, Supporting People has also introduced a competitive element to the funding cycle. Rather than an automatic allocation, organisations providing emergency accommodation for single homeless people must now bid for Supporting People funds against other organisations offering accommodation and support to vulnerable people in their area (DETR, 2001).

Assessing the state of Britain’s emergency accommodation sector

On the face of it at least, such changes have proved remarkably effective in reducing levels of rough sleeping: down from a reported 1850 people in 1998, to a little over 500 in 2004 (NAO, 2005). As a result, government policy has recently shifted again. Having apparently ‘solved’ a crisis of street homelessness, the focus of both government and Britain’s homelessness pressure groups is now ‘hidden homelessness’ (CRISIS, 2004). In fact, doubts have been raised over the veracity of recent rough sleeper counts (Morrison and Seymenliyska, 2001). More generally, very little is known about the nature of the emergency accommodation currently available to those sleeping rough, or about the effects of the changes traced above: most notably, whether HAP did indeed increase the supply of emergency accommodation in areas outside of London, or finally address the problems of quality that have dogged the sector for so long (Van Doorn and Williamson, 2001).
Up to now, gaining a comprehensive picture of the state of Britain’s emergency accommodation sector or of the impact of recent government initiatives has proved difficult. Whilst assessments of the *RSI* and *HAP* have yet to focus directly on their impact on the nature or supply of direct access hostel and night shelter accommodation (Randall and Brown, 1993, 1996, 2002), existing surveys of the sector are out-of-date and restricted to studies of only a handful of places (Ham and Carter, 1996; Harrison, 1996; Warrington, 1997).

The survey and supporting interviews reported here were designed to address this gap. The survey took the form of a two-part postal and follow-up telephone survey of ‘direct access’ hostels and night shelters operating in England, Wales and Scotland (outside of London). Conducted between September and December 2001, the survey formed the first part of a broader project investigating the supply and use of emergency services (direct access hostels, night shelters, day centres and soup runs) for single homeless people outside of London (Cloke et al, 2004). The survey thus offers a ‘snap shot’ of the nature of Britain’s emergency accommodation sector as the *Homelessness Action Programme* drew to a close when the sector stood poised on a new era of funding and regulation.

The survey mailing list was compiled from records on the Resource Information Service’s Hostels On-Line database (www.hostels.org.uk) and supplemented with information provided by a variety of other organisations. Having identified 597 potential respondents, responses were received from 347 project managers: a response rate of 58%. Of these, 135 projects had either closed or were no longer operating on a
direct access basis. Of the remainder, 187 managers completed the postal survey, and 25 the shorter telephone interview.

In line with previous studies, for the purpose of the survey a ‘hostel’ was defined as any residential building not intended for permanent residence; not owned by a private individual or company (unless under a not-for-profit arrangement); and containing shared facilities (c.f. Bacon et al, 1995). Projects were defined as ‘direct access’ if accepting self-referrals and not intended to be a long-term residence (c.f. Harrison, 1996; www.hostels.org.uk). The survey itself focused on four main areas: the form of accommodation (building quality and design); resident profiles and levels of occupancy; levels of support and access to associated support services; and the basic structure of the sector (the relative mix of statutory and non-statutory providers, evidence of joint working, funding streams and regulatory frameworks).

The survey was supported by approximately two hundred in-depth interviews with project managers and paid staff, volunteers and service users. To enable more detailed comparison of the ways in which service organisations respond to changes in funding and regulation, the interview schedule was restricted to projects operating in England rather than Scotland and Wales, where projects may draw on different funding streams (for example, The Scottish Executive or Welsh Assembly) and hence be subject to different regulatory requirements. Interviews were conducted at thirteen night shelters and hostels in seven towns and cities - chosen so as to enable an analysis of different street homeless ‘scenes’ in places with varying levels of service provision. Interviews with management and staff focused upon the guiding principles and day-to-day practices of the hostel. Interviews with residents focused upon their
experiences of hostel life and of a broader emergency service network. For reasons of anonymity, all names have been changed.

**Growth at the grass roots: the limited reach of the Homelessness Action Programme**

The survey reveals the extent to which a vital part of the accommodation and care available to single homeless people in Britain continues to rely on the activities of the voluntary sector. Indeed, of the 212 emergency accommodation projects reported operating outside of London in December 2001, no fewer than 91% were managed by voluntary or charitable organisations, just 8% by local authorities and less than 1% by private individuals or not-for-profit companies. It also reveals important changes to the make-up of the sector over recent decades. Whereas in 1945 some 68% of projects still in existence were owned and managed by just three large, faith based organisations (the Salvation Army, YMCA and the English Churches Housing Group) by 2001 the relative share of projects provided by these organisations had declined to just 19%, with the remainder managed by no fewer than 145 separate organisations - the vast majority overseeing a single project.

The number of new projects coming on stream also appears to have grown rapidly over recent decades, with an especially sharp rise in the 1970s and 1980s, when levels of rough sleeping first began to rise, and again in the early 1990s. Significantly, however, recent central government initiatives aimed at stimulating the supply of emergency accommodation beyond the capital appear to have had far less impact than might be anticipated. Indeed, more projects came on stream in the period immediately before the expansion of the RSI to areas outside of London (1995-7) and the
introduction of *HAP* – a period when the demand for emergency accommodation outside of London was rising sharply but central government programme money unavailable - than subsequently (Ham and Carter, 1996) (Figure 1). Certainly, even under *HAP* the flow of funding seems to have remained both remarkably restricted (with just 20% of projects reporting receipt of *HAP* funding) and highly uneven geographically. Hence, a number of hostel managers complained of a ‘post code lottery’, and of difficulties in attracting *HAP* funding even when confronted by high levels of rough sleeping:

\[\ldots\text{[At the end of the day] we are not London. Money just doesn’t just come down here. We are too far away. It’s the tourist Mecca of Britain. ‘The tourists don’t want to see homelessness, sweep it under the carpet’ - but they wont give us any money to sweep it with! (Hostel Manager, Cornwall)}\]

**Continued unevenness in the quality of emergency accommodation and care**

Though *HAP* itself seems to have done little to stimulate the supply of emergency accommodation outside of London, it would be wrong to see the emergence of new projects as an entirely ‘organic’ process. Rather, the remarkable growth in the number of emergency accommodation projects operating outside of London over the past decade or so has been underwritten by significant *indirect* state subsidies. Thus, the vast majority of projects responding to the survey were indeed heavily dependent upon statutory funding for their main sources of income: with no fewer than 77% of projects relying upon statutory funding for at least 75% of their income, and 91% of projects reporting that statutory sources accounted for at least 50% of annual income. Of these sources, Housing Benefit was by far the most important, accounting for at least 25% of total annual income for no fewer than 75% of projects, and at least 50% of total income for almost two thirds (62%).
But, such subsidies not-withstanding, it is also clear that the sector as a whole continues to operate in a climate of considerable financial insecurity. In particular, managers complained of continued difficulties in securing a regular flow of core funding to supplement the income provided through Housing Benefit payments. Short-term programme monies in particular, including \textit{HAP}, were often seen as unreliable - necessitating that managers become adept at playing the ‘funding game’; changing the appearance (if not the substance) of the services a project offered if they were to safeguard their income. Significantly, such practices were understood as heightening inequalities between different organisations, as some managers were more adept at this game than others:

“The major difficulty is core funding. There are hundreds of funders out there that [will] say, ‘Wonderful new project … of course we’ll help to get it off the ground’. [But only] a very minute number who will provide core funding. … [So what you end up with] is reinvent[ing] the same project every three years and just mak[ing] it sound like a new initiative … It’s the art of funding applications. Some people know it, some people don’t, and I think you see the differences in which agencies have got money and which one’s haven’t.”
(Manager, Homeless Support Service, Yorkshire)

As a result, the majority of projects supplemented the income provided through Housing Benefit with funding from a multitude of other statutory agencies, including the Housing Corporation, Local Authorities, Health Authorities, and Probation. But a significant proportion also remained reliant on other ways of supplementing their income. Most obviously, a majority continued to rely on some form of donation to provide (the very) basic services that clients needed. Though few relied to any significant extent upon financial donations (with just 12\% of projects reporting donations as providing more than 25\% of their income) a majority (65\%) continued to rely upon gifts-in-kind for at least a proportion (25\%) of the food and clothing they provided. For a significant minority (40\%) gifts-in-kind represented a major source of material resource: providing at least 50\% of all food served. Notably, for some the last
few years had seen a decline in charitable giving. Posing a threat to the continued viability of their service, such a decline was attributed by managers to a growing sense amongst members of the public that since the highly publicised success of HAP the problems of homelessness had been ‘solved’.

The continued financial constraints reported by managers despite the release of monies under HAP had important ramifications for the development of services, and in particular the extent to which organisations continued to rely upon volunteer labour. Reflecting longer term trends towards professionalisation, and the increased emphasis placed on resettlement and support by HAP, the vast majority of projects (96%) employed at least one paid member of staff. Most also described themselves as offering either ‘medium’ (47%) or ‘high’ (40%) levels of support: providing advice and resettlement support or additional skills training alongside accommodation, food and basic medical care. But a significant minority (46%) also continued to rely quite heavily upon volunteers. As one manager put it:

“I think most voluntary organisations would collapse without voluntary staff. When I say we need seven paid members of staff, that’s actually seven paid members supported by perhaps a team of twenty volunteers … If I actually had to start looking at raising the amount of funding that meant that we didn’t have to work with any volunteers, we would need to employ a team of fund raisers [just for that].”
(Manager, Homeless Support Service, Yorkshire)

Managers were keen to stress the valuable work done by volunteer staff, who as well as an important material resource were seen as crucial in fostering a sense of support for clients who otherwise felt excluded from the wider community. But it is also clear that for many managers the reliance on volunteers was as at odds with a more professional approach - with volunteers perceived as lacking the specialist knowledge
and skills necessary for work with a vulnerable client group and posing problems with regards accountability and quality control:

“We have to be very very careful. This is a specialised industry, it’s hard work and you have to know what you’re doing, otherwise you’ll put not just yourself but everybody else in danger … We’ve tried it [working with volunteers] in the past, and the ones that we had were disastrous - because they’re above any codes of behaviour, they're above any policies and procedures. I can’t sack them, I can’t reprimand them really, ‘cos they’ll just say ‘Sod it’ and go.”

(Hostel Manager, Yorkshire)

Not-withstanding such concerns, however, managers reported that they often had little choice but to use volunteers even in core service areas: with a third of the projects deploying volunteer labour using volunteers in their advice and resettlement work, for example. In these situations especially, training was a central concern. Yet almost a third (29%) of projects reported that they were unable to provide specialist training for their advice and resettlement workers. Where training was provided, it was often provided in-house (38% of projects) rather than by an accredited external agency (68%) and managers admitted that when faced with the need to reduce expenditure it was often the training budget that was the first to be cut.

With a significant proportion of projects still unable fully to meet the needs of their residents in-house, the mechanisms put in place under HAP to facilitate closer working relationships between different local service providers have proved important - and broadly effective. Hence, 67% of projects identified a local ‘street services consortia’ operating in their area, for example, and where such consortia were active the majority of project managers (97%) were members. None-the-less problems remained here too. Not least, at a strategic level very few projects were engaged in the joint planning of services with other service providers – even those operating other emergency accommodation projects in their area (Figure 2). More importantly, project
managers referred to problems accessing key services. Most obviously, in interview both managers, staff and residents repeatedly stressed the difficulties they faced as a result of a dramatic increase in heroin use especially in recent years:

“I’ve never been anywhere where it’s been so drug orientated. All the young ones, everybody there, you know, 99.9% [are using] …”
(Don, 52, Resident of HAP funded Hostel, Bristol)

Interviewer: What would you say are the main gaps in services?
-: Drug services, because it’s just so overwhelmed in ****, so even though you know you’ve got a lad who’s desperate, desperate to come off the gear, he’ll have to wait months for methadone or the one hospital detox bed in [the city].
(Hostel Staff, Yorkshire)

As well as causing significant problems within hostels, the increase in drug use had other knock-on effects too. Not least, as managers found it more and more difficult to find move-on accommodation for those with higher support needs, their hostels were gradually silting up - leaving other ‘less vulnerable’ clients with literally nowhere to go:

“It’s a vicious circle round here. The reason I’ve found it difficult to get hostel accommodation is because I’m not an alcoholic, I’m not a drug addict, I’ve not no physical or mental disabilities or social disabilities. To the government I’m ‘normal’ … [So] I’ve gone to the bottom of the list.
(Steve, 43, Former Rough Sleeper, Bristol)

Significant strides do seem to have been made with regards the physical quality of accommodation. Certainly, the typical emergency accommodation project can no longer be captured in the image of a large, institutional hostel or of a basic night shelter located in a church crypt or converted warehouse. Instead, the majority of projects took the form of either residential conversions (38%) or purpose built units (37%) (c.f. Saunders, 1986). More importantly, the majority were based around relatively small units (with 20% of projects offering between one and nine beds, and a further 43% between ten and twenty four). In contrast to the early 1990s, when the majority of projects operating outside of London were still unable to offer single room
accommodation, 82% of bed spaces were reported as being in single rooms, with only 12% arranged in shared rooms and less than 6% laid out in dormitories (c.f. Randall, 1992). Finally, on paper at least, the sector would also seem to have at last shaken off an ethos of ‘less eligibility’. For example, the majority of managers described their projects as clean, bright, spacious, welcoming and ‘homely’ rather than institutional in feel when asked to rank the condition of premises on a five point Likert scale (c.f. Evans, 1991).

But elsewhere, and even in relatively new projects, physical conditions were in fact often disturbingly low. Far from a relic of the past, almost a fifth (18%) of the new projects coming on stream in the 1990s described themselves as still able to offer only basic ‘night shelter’ accommodation, where conditions – and the rules and regulations imposed upon residents – were little changed from those found thirty years ago (c.f. Stewart, 1975) (Figure 3):

Interviewer: Have you ever used the Night Shelter?
-: No … I’ve eaten there, but I’ve never actually stayed there … It’s filthy, dirty, …. needles everywhere. I don’t want to end up with Hepatitis or AIDS … or lice.
(Martin, 43, Rough Sleeper, Worcester)

More generally, interviews with staff and residents made plain that whilst a number of projects are now indeed providing high quality accommodation and support, the quality of both remains markedly uneven across the sector as a whole. Thus, for some their first experience of hostel life had reassured them that Britain’s direct access hostels are no longer the “dingy dark places” that they once were and reported working with staff who gave them “all the help you need” (Hostel Residents, Bristol). For others, however, recent attempts to improve the quality of accommodation and
care offered to single homeless people through enhanced funding and regulation seem to have had little if any effect.

In particular, residents pointed to increased levels of violence in Britain’s hostels as a result of increased drug use, but also to sometimes appalling physical conditions:

“It [the night shelter] is dead heavy - a dead aggressive place. Because of the drugs … it’s all knives and all this and all that, you know what I mean? … Threatening you with an empty syringe and [all that].”
(Nigel, 52, Night shelter resident, Worcester)

“The hygiene’s crap. It’s not the cleaner’s fault, it’s the people who live here. They crap here, there and everywhere. They don’t always use the toilet - they rub it all down the walls. They’re puking everywhere, it’s a real shit hole.”
(Rich, 28, Resident of HAP Funded Hostel, Bristol)

The standard of care and support provided by hostel staff also varied widely, with some residents pointing to the problems they had in establishing relationships of trust in a context of continual staff turnover. Others reported difficulties in accessing meaningful support in environments where staff and volunteers seemed so ‘hardened’ by years of work with vulnerable and sometimes aggressive clients that they no longer attempted to provide the care that people needed:

“People like me, we find it hard to trust people. We’ve got a lot of trust issues. Since I’ve been here 3 key workers have left. So the trust you build up, then they leave and it’s hard. Trust is a lot to us.”
(David, 47, Resident of HAP funded Hostel, Bristol)

“If you have a problem it’s no good … talking to a member of staff … They’ll listen to you and it’s “Yes, I’ll get someone to help you.” And then they [just] vanish upstairs … The staff are very hardened towards people because they’ve been so abused over the years … They sit behind their armoured glass with their feet up drinking their tea and you can go and ask them something and they might decide to do something and they might not. [And] it’s no good you getting angry. You can’t put your fist through armoured glass. Although I’ve seen people try.”
(Alan, 53, Resident of HAP funded Hostel, Bristol)
Towards a new era?

Significantly, current regulatory arrangements make it very difficult to establish just how widespread such experiences may be. In fact, on the one hand, providers of emergency accommodation face a bewildering array of monitoring requirements, as individual funding bodies each require information about a project – most commonly, details of its finances (in 44% of cases) or of its client group (in 41% of cases) - and in interview managers often complained that the gathering of information left little time to deliver the services they were being funded to provide:

-: For an agency that is under-staffed to start with, it has reached the point where the level of paperwork is starting to be detrimental to the work that we should be doing with the clients. We have one member of staff [for whom] fifty per cent of time is taken up [just] with paperwork – [providing] feedback information for XXXX.
(Manager, Homeless Support Service, Yorkshire, 25/06/02)

On the other hand, despite the efforts made under HAP to put in place more rigorous forms of monitoring and regulation, the regulatory frameworks applying to the vast majority of emergency accommodation projects remain remarkably thin. Certainly, funding bodies rarely require information that can be used to assess the quality of accommodation or support offered to residents. Hence, just 7% of projects reported having to provide information about the level or form of staff training, for example, and just 3% any form of client feedback. More striking still, fewer than half (48%) reported that site visits formed part of their current monitoring arrangements and just 39% of organisations were Registered Social Landlords: thus making them accountable to the Housing Corporation. Though the spread of local service consortia and of joint working may be opening projects up to some form of informal monitoring by other local service providers, only two thirds (62%) of projects were formally monitored by their local authority – with fewer than half of these subject to regular inspection.
In theory at least, standards of accommodation and care should improve and become more uniform with the introduction of *Supporting People*. Under that programme, projects seeking *Supporting People* funding are required to adhere to standards laid down in the National Housing Federation’s ‘Framework for Housing Care and Support’, with regular monitoring by the responsible local authority (DETR, 2001). In practice, it is clear that a significant proportion of projects are currently a long way short of the benchmark laid down by the Housing Federation (Van Doorn and Kain, 2003). Nor is it clear how effective the monitoring arrangements put in place under *Supporting People* will be. One of the more worrying aspects of the experiences outlined above is that a number come from residents of *HAP* funded hostels. Though on paper these projects provided people with a comprehensive programme of support funded through *HAP* and monitored in the form of regular performance indicators by the local authority, for many residents there was very little evidence of this support on the ground.

It is also possible that projects currently a long way short of the standards required for *Supporting People* funding, or lacking the managerial expertise necessary to apply for funding, will choose simply not to apply to the programme. If so, variations in the quality of accommodation and care offered to single homeless people already apparent under *HAP* will become more rather than less marked (see also May et al, 2005): 

"The local authority, coupled with the RSU, have been enormously effective in developing strategies, getting people around the table that haven't met before, and developing a huge range of services … it's been really impressive …The … problem comes with what I call 'ad-hoc' agencies, not in receipt of funding … who are sort of ‘out of the loop’ - for example XXXX ….. It’s quite difficult getting these agencies … on board in terms of ensuring a professional approach to the work: not just in health and safety and training issues, but more particularly, helping clients move away from a life on the streets - giving people opportunities
to move forward in their lives … I [also] think they're … putting their staff at risk, because they don't know who they're taking and they don't know what they're up against.”  
(Homeless Services Manager, Bristol)

Of greater concern still, where *HAP* seems to have opened up a gap between those able to attract *additional* programme funding and those still reliant at that time on *Transitional Housing Benefit* and other sources of income, the move to *Supporting People* will see a reduction in the funding available to those opting out of the new funding regime: as the removal of *Transitional Housing Benefit* results in the loss of a key part of their core funding. Rather than leading to improvements across the sector as whole, then, it is possible that the move to *Supporting People* will heighten rather than reduce the unevenness in the quality of accommodation and care that still characterises Britain’s emergency accommodation sector. At the same time, though welcoming the greater financial stability it offers, a number of managers expressed concerns that the introduction of *Supporting People* would see them lose out in the longer term: as projects providing emergency accommodation for single homeless people will be forced to compete for funds with projects providing accommodation and care to more ‘deserving’ groups.

**Conclusions**

Having received little support under the previous administration’s *Rough Sleeper’s Initiative*, a host of new initiatives introduced by New Labour promised to finally provide a secure source of funding to the voluntary organisations providing emergency accommodation to those sleeping rough outside of London, and to bind those organisations in to a meaningful regulatory framework so as to improve the quality of services they offer. Yet, at the close of New Labour’s *Homelessness Action Programme*, fewer than a quarter of the voluntary sector organisations providing
emergency accommodation for those sleeping rough outside of London had received any of the money set aside under *HAP*, or were subject to the enhanced regulatory framework introduced by that programme. Instead, whilst the 1990s did indeed see a significant rise in the number of new projects opening their doors to single homeless people, the vast majority of such projects continued to be funded through indirect state subsidy (notably, *Housing Benefits*) rather than new programme monies, and to operate in a climate of considerable financial insecurity. As a result, even in new projects conditions often remained disturbingly low and almost half of all projects continued to rely on untrained volunteer staff. More generally, though improvements have been made to the quality of emergency accommodation available to single homeless people over the past thirty years or so, recent government initiatives have done little to address continuing unevenness in the quality of accommodation and care available in different projects. Indeed, far from reducing such unevenness, the distribution of funding under *HAP* seems to have increased the gap between different providers: a gap that seems likely to grow rather than diminish with the advent of *Supporting People*.

In light of such a picture, important questions need to be asked about the future role of voluntary sector organisations in the provision of emergency accommodation and care for single homeless people. Three issues are of especially pressing concern. First, though very serious problems remain with the quality of service offered by Britain’s night shelters and hostels, responsibility for such problems cannot wholly be laid at the door of the voluntary sector. In fact, the last thirty years have seen significant improvements to the quality of accommodation and care provided by Britain’s voluntary sector organisations. Such improvements are largely a result of the efforts
made by the voluntary sector itself to put its own house in order (Foord et al, 1998). They have come in the context of severe financial constraint, without statutory guidance or enforcement (Van Doorn and Williamson, 2001). Given these improvements, and the depth of investment and resource already committed by the sector to the problems of single homelessness and rough sleeping, whatever problems remain, now is not the time to pull the plug on the voluntary organisations that continue to supply the vast majority of Britain’s emergency accommodation.

Rather, the efforts of pressure groups and lobbyists should be spent trying to convince government finally to address the problems of funding and regulation that continue to inhibit good practice. Here, rather than channel resources to the best providers, the challenge is to find ways of working with those who remain ‘outside the loop’ of the Supporting People framework: seeking ways to improve the services, to paraphrase Tom Ling, offered by the most ‘unfit’ partners in the voluntary sector (Ling, 2000). To achieve this, it is vital that the sector as a whole receives an immediate and significant injection of funding but also that, rather than any reduction in funding, the most basic projects especially are provided with enhanced resource and guidance. Any such increase in resource must be accompanied by the imposition of meaningful regulation. The move to the more stringent monitoring requirements placed upon local authorities under Supporting People is a step in the right direction, but it is not enough. Not least, if not receiving funding through Supporting People, providers will not be subject to that programme’s quality assessment framework. The introduction of a proper Hostels Inspectorate working through a programme of site visits rather than paper audit, and covering all of Britain’s night shelters and hostels, is now an urgent priority. Exactly such a body was promised at the close of the Homelessness Action
Programme (DETR, 2002) but has yet to materialise – and seems in fact to slipped off the Homelessness Directorate’s agenda (National Audit Office, 2005).

Second, given the growing use of heroin especially amongst single homeless people, it is vital that any attempts to expand and improve the emergency accommodation available to single homeless people is matched by an increased commitment to drug treatment. Clearly, Britain’s night shelters and hostels can not hope to confront the problems of drug use on their own. Not least, current levels of drug use make it very difficult for any residents who wish to do so to address their addiction, whilst a shortage of rehab beds means that hostels managers have few places to which they can refer their residents. Instead, outlining the most appropriate way of meeting these needs, Neale (2001) suggests a two part strategy: increasing the provision of methadone scripts through General Practitioners and specialist health care teams working specifically with homeless people; and expanding the supply of residential treatment programmes.

Finally, whilst the attention of government and of pressure groups is now turning towards a consideration of the problems of hidden homeliness rather than rough sleeping, it needs to be recognised that Britain’s crisis of rough sleeping is by no means over. Indeed, far from seeing a decline in the demand for their services, as the Homelessness Action Programme drew to a close, Britain’s emergency accommodation projects were operating at or very near capacity. Average occupancy levels for the projects responding to this survey stood at 92%. Almost half of all projects (49%) were 100% full, 23% of projects had resorted to operating a waiting list, and a fifth (22%) had turned people away on the same night in August 2001.
Together with the problems of ‘silting-up’ reported by managers unable to secure suitable ‘move-on’ accommodation for their clients, the signs are therefore that levels of rough sleeping may well rise again in the near future. If it is to be able to meet continuing demand, Britain’s emergency accommodation network needs at the very least to retain current capacity. If the problems of single homelessness and rough sleeping are ever to be properly addressed, however, the need is for something more. Rather than look only to a crisis of ‘rough sleeping’ - and hence to the number of emergency beds necessary to stave off such a crisis - the real need is to finally consider the crisis in accommodation and care that continues to unfold behind the doors of Britain’s night shelters and hostels, and to introduce a system of funding and support that will help the voluntary sector organisations working with single homeless people to better address their needs.

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FIGURES

Figure 1
Number of Projects Operating 1945-2001
Date Number of Projects Still Operating in 2001, in Operation in -

1945 19
1969 29
1979 50
1989 91
1997 182
2001 212

Number of projects 212 (postal and follow up telephone survey)

Figure 2
Measures of Joint Working

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Associated local service agency</th>
<th>% of managers reporting named contact in that agency</th>
<th>% of managers reporting joint planning with that agency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health Team</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeless Outreach Team</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing benefit/other benefit agency</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SRL or private sector landlords</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other hostel/night shelter</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day Centre</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug/alcohol service</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Number of projects 187 (postal survey only)

Figure 3
Rules and Regulations by Project Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project Type</th>
<th>Curfew</th>
<th>Bedtime</th>
<th>Vacate During Day Time</th>
<th>No Visitors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Night Shelter</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hostel</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Number of projects 187 (postal survey only)
References


