Reshaping Homeless and Inequalities in Oxfordshire through Collaboration and Co-production

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An abstract from OHCHR | Homelessness and human rights

"Homelessness is a profound assault on dignity, social inclusion and the right to life. It is a prima facie violation of the right to housing and violates a number of other human rights in addition to the right to life, including non-discrimination, health, water and sanitation, security of the person and freedom from cruel, degrading, and inhuman treatment." - Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing (A/HRC/43/43, para.30)

Introduction:-

Homelessness indicates a government failure to guarantee access to safe, affordable, and adequate housing, it violates a number of human rights and has a known link to mental and physical ill-health:

A. Every year there are several thousand premature and preventable deaths connected to home loss. The right to life is more than survival, it encompasses the core notion that everyone has the right to enjoy her or his life well.
B. Homelessness - often addressed with criminalization, violence, and aggressive policies violating, rather than safeguarding.
C. Housing status, or the lack of, generates much institutional and individual discrimination, across political, economic, and social rights.

National and International homelessness types:

1. Primary homelessness – living on the streets, in parks, in deserted buildings.
2. Secondary homelessness – living in temporary shelters such as refuges, emergency accommodation or sleeping on a friend's couch; and
3. Tertiary homelessness – living in a boarding room.

The local issue:

Oxfordshire's homeless community face a complex web of problems that needs to be addressed to help them gain and sustain permanent housing and work.

This report believes that homelessness support and housing services are failing to support the multiple issues effectively.

Oxford homeless charities say a picture is emerging of people being let down by a system that is both underfunded and understaffed, even after COVID "everyone in" policies from central government.

The current system design does not recognise the individuality of service users. Individuals fall through the gaps as the many local service providers do not communicate with each other well.

Nine homeless people - aged between 26 and 57 - died on the streets and in supported accommodation between December 2018 and July 2019.

 Dr Ross said, "The Oxfordshire Safeguarding Adults Board would like to acknowledge the work of agencies working directly with homeless people to support them with what are often complex challenges in their lives. This review has highlighted a number of areas of learning for organisations in Oxfordshire, which the Oxfordshire Safeguarding Adults Board members have recognised and are using to improve their services. The board is committed to working alongside partners in order to ensure that the recommendations are implemented and understood by professionals, improving how we interact and better serve those who are at risk of becoming homeless in Oxfordshire." (*BBC News, 24th November 2020*)

A further three homeless people died 2020 in supported accommodation. February and April 2021 a further two people died. Each is one too many.

Who am I?

I am part of Lived Experience Advisory Forum (LEAF) and we are talking to homeless people on a regular individualised basis. I also network across Oxford City and County Council and am a trusted part of the Tenant Involvement Team. I also have lived experience of homelessness and mental illness.

I recognise the issues are complex but can be fixed. Official homeless support services need to engage better with the homeless community through a collaborative and co-productive monitoring mechanism, within an open and transparent inspection system. This needs to have a clear plan of action behind it for the next 3 years, plus additional funding and quality assurance oversight.

When we look at the deaths, if we had more compassion, could we have saved those people? Councils and "those in power" need to face the hard truth that the lack of both financial and social resources in capitalism keeps poverty, inequalities, and homelessness alive.

So, how do we go forwards post COVID support style?

> ➢ Engage in a new type and style of consultation and collaboration ongoing with financial and personnel resources to really get to grips and understand how people feel not just on a practical but an emotional level, and act on the feedback. This can be done through a *You Said, We Did* exercise to show how the services are actively trying to improve.
> ➢ Develop a trusted advocacy service, employing those currently homeless, to monitor local services - are they actively meeting the needs and expectations via a service level agreement if necessary.
> ➢ Carry out a root and branch review of current services, funding, housing, and health provisions.

➢ Accept that some people don't want help, but we should not dismiss their views and reasoning for turning down help. At some stage they may choose to engage.

For younger care leavers:

There is a high turnover/ shortage of support workers which undermines relationships, safeguarding risks can go unnoticed. This group are often quickly socially excluded, entering homelessness services with unaddressed trauma, low self-confidence, and little trust. Sustaining trusting relationships is particularly significant in building self-esteem, self-respect, and a sense of control.

To sustain any recovery, housing and financial stability providers need to ensure that they recognise what 'specific' social requirements are needed. The service user should be at very heart of everything the service provider does and this is repeated across all and any vulnerable groups at risk of homelessness.

Making this progressive change of inclusion will aid a more of an honest and open dialogue that emphasises a person's identity, cultural and ethnic needs, and accept their lifestyle choices within the context of their recovery and life improvements.

November 2020 - Homeless Link's report uncovered a worrying reality of systemic failures curbing young people's potential, undermining their resilience, failing to empower them.

Most of these services are either funded through local or national government, or charitable donations yet those who continue to fund are not monitoring the effectiveness and value for money. Funding is not always the issue to poor performance but bad management processes and an unwillingness to learn from service failings are.

Making recommendations happen:

What is essential is that services understand how their experiences have contributed to their chaotic and troubled lives.

Treating the past and understanding where a person has come from is essential for them to build the appropriate coping mechanisms. Mental health, substance misuse, homelessness and social isolation related to events, peer pressure and social pressures so these issues must be dealt with first.

Services need to be free for users, without stigma and easily assessable, simplified so that service users are not required to repeat their trauma and story all the time.

It is through consulting with the very people who have lived experience that local services can make an honest appraisal of their services and generate a progressive inclusion focus so the lead is the customer as per "Housing First" user-led service model.

The local community can bring much lived experience resources, skills, and capabilities to their interactions.

Providers need to be willing to share power and negotiate the interaction. There are strong managerial reasons for adopting shared management and storytelling systems.

When setting up services or re- tendering take a deep look into the management and staffing structure, policies, procedures, complaint systems and request evidence on how they have helped services users sustain their long-term recovery.

By carrying out these vital checks with service users on the review panel we would gain a greater insight into performance and expertise, improving trust and transparency.