

Supporting People – Housing Related Support Strategy Extern Response

Extern is pleased to have the opportunity to comment on the Housing Related Support Strategy 2012-2015.

The key aims of preventing homelessness occurring, by providing a range of services is a core aspect of current provision within the Supporting People (SP) funded projects. This crucial focus should remain at the centre of Floating Support and resettlement funded Services.

Principles /Objectives

The underpinning principles of independence, involvement, accessibility, flexibility and transparency are commendable and must be evidenced in the real world. Further the key objectives are focussed and realistic which bodes well for delivery.

Extern agrees that pathways ‘in to’ and ‘out of’ are extremely important to ensure appropriate service provision, reduction in labelling and a helping hand to move to more permanent provision as some Service Users can and may want to actually manage without services.

Breaking the cycle of homelessness can be difficult especially for those with entrenched behavioural or other complex needs, but intensive support to assist with independent living should start when the person presents to a homeless hostel and specific programmes should be employed by to encourage the development of independent living skills prior to securing new accommodation. These issues are often very complex and multiple and often require a multidisciplinary approach to interventions and support. With the QAF2 assessment tool the standards of support for people within the homeless sector have increased and led to the implementation of more effective packages of support. The role of the SP Lead and positive working relationships with this person enhances professional delivery and understanding for all concerned.

The emphasis on service user involvement in service provision and direction within QAF has also led to an increase in quality services in the sector. This should only be enhanced in the coming years under the new strategy. Extern values the recognition given to Service User involvement and Extern contributes to this key area via its Suitcase Project which gives those experiencing homelessness a genuine not token voice.

Hostel providers need to be encouraged to look not only at the quality of support programmes they provide to service users and the outcomes but the tolerance of hostels needs to be continued to be increased. A mapping exercise for those moving through the hostel system to their own accommodation to look at the value of the services provided through the continuum of service would be beneficial and an evaluation of their effectiveness from the service user perspective. Those who are

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episodic and /or repeat homeless presenters could also be surveyed to reflect on what aspects hindered them making a success of resettlement on a more permanent basis – new services could then be engineered or current services remodelled if a common theme emerged and gap in provision was realised/ identified.

As the temporary homeless provision becomes increasingly more pressurised and the demographics of homelessness is changing and there appears to be an increase in both older and younger homeless the development/ reconfiguration of new/ different services needs to be considered. Also Extern would concur with the need to give robust consideration to services in rural areas and welcome the identification of difficulties for older people and issues arising regardless of tenure which is notable and progressive.

Section 4

Extern commends Supporting People's approach to reflect the four key strategic objectives within the NIHE Homeless Strategy. Extern is committed to contribute to the successful delivery of such.

Extern agrees that whilst a number of strategic drivers impact upon service provision, many are cross-cutting and service users do not fit into neat boxes but often face many and varied challenges. Extern also recognises that those facing issues relating to homelessness are now older, younger, being released from institutions, women, Asylum Seekers / Refugees– all of these are challenges for many within the sector.

Welfare Reform must be acknowledged as a major factor which will impact upon many marginalised service users who are trying to live independently and will present significant challenges to all working in the sector to ensure that those in need are given the necessary support. SP will need to be proactive in assisting Floating Support and hostels to access training and information to inform these services of the way forward to assist the service users. Preparing for legislative changes will be key to the provision of services within the homeless sector over the next few years especially in light of the Housing Strategy NI. And the wider changes in the NIHE.

Extern concurs with the importance of tenancy sustainment and delivers services in terms of Homeless Floating Support, Offender Floating Support and Alcohol Housing Support – a Project which supports those in their own tenancy who are experiencing severe alcohol problems, have mental health or physical ill health and often chaotic lifestyles (Section 4.1.3). Floating Support Services have a key role in preventing repeat homelessness or preventing homelessness occurring. To address this, Floating Support services need to continue to provide both specialist and generic services to the sector.

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The enhancement of existing Services that are meeting significant needs would seem to be a realistic and value for money option. The knowledge base, specialist skills and networks would be readily available to ensure quality delivery.

For example, those who are capable of engaging and supporting people with a dual diagnosis should be enhanced to meet the growing population of people who are dually diagnosed and fall outside the remit of other statutory support systems e.g. due to dependent drug or alcohol use, personality disorders etc. Those who support low to medium support needs, need to be more focused on who they support and the intensity of the support package. One aspect of Floating Support is the need for much more intensive work with a lower number of referred cases. This will lead to better outcomes through the ability to offer intensified services at crisis point and based on relationship building to assist service users coming back to a service when they need help rather than continuing on and allowing the situation to deteriorate. Again this requires services to be tailored, for example some are better at offering medium intensity support, others better at working with arrears and practical issues, while some are more focused on mental health, addiction based support and can use their skills to advocate and network widely.

Often in addition to housing needs i.e. rent arrears, electricity/ heating issues many service users have significant benefit and debt issues. These problems are often compounded by mental ill health, poor physical health and significant problematic alcohol and drug issues. All of these impact significantly on the person's ability to maintain their accommodation. The complexity of many of the cases referred to existing Floating Support services, would mean that services should have an increased knowledge of drug/ alcohol/ mental health issues to work more effectively with these cases. While there are specific drug and alcohol services the key to engagement and successful outcomes lies in a pragmatic and flexible approach to engagement. The ability to work alongside statutory services and draw in a number of support networks improves outcomes but relies on existing systems and mutual understanding of both care and support sector roles. The distinction between care and support services at times becomes blurred due to the complexity of cases and the difficulty in engaging some service users with statutory services, however, a case management approach with SP Floating Support leading the process can work effectively to advocate and co-ordinate a structured response to multiagency support for difficult complex cases. The interface with health services will continue to form a key part of Supporting People funded service as the "shift left" of health and social care under Transforming Your Care will place greater emphasis on community based care. The remit of Floating Support services will become even more essential in assisting people to access services and in preventing homelessness.

It will be vital that services in the voluntary sector supported by SP can develop networks with statutory health services to utilise resource especially for service users

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with drug and or alcohol issues. The idea that one agency can provide all the answers for these complex cases is out-dated and the best results are for a shared care/ support approach from a number of agencies. Key to this is security of contracts within the voluntary providers. The need for pragmatic service provision across agencies should be supported by SP especially for cases with multiple needs or a history of failing when moved to the community.

Extern recognises the challenges of working with ex-offenders and indeed the challenge of contributing to service provision and appropriate resettlement for those convicted of sexual offences. The complexity of cases referred is significant and Staff have now developed key skills and networks to work with a myriad of issues and notable risks. Extern's Offender Floating Support now meets the challenges of issues pertaining to intimidation, hostility, victim issues and works hard with a range of professionals to ensure a safer community for all.

Accommodation for female offenders is an area which demands attention and a unique response – to ensure there is appropriate provision, in terms of how and what needs are to be met and to ensure equity of service delivery. Extern again is committed to this work and Extern's Floating Support contributes to quality services for Women who come with homeless issues and also offending (Hard to Place Females 2013), mental/physical health, sensory challenges, earning disability, brain injury, leaving care and addiction issues.

Extern would also be keen to highlight the issue of anti-social behaviour and the role of NIHE. Undoubtedly intensive and robust Floating Support Services contribute significantly to a reduction in this behaviour by supporting service users in their tenancy and advocating and networking with a range of professionals, landlords, councils, environmental health etc

The ability to reduce the length of time people are homeless will also depend on these regionalised changes i.e. new builds, reallocation of stock and the economic environment. It is admirable to strive to reduce waiting lists and time in hostels/ temporary accommodation but this will be dependant on stock availability and aspects such as landlord buy in to single let schemes/ rent bond schemes. Schemes such as rent bond need to be inclusive of all the people requiring the service and currently people with complex and challenging behaviours are excluded from many of these schemes and landlord accommodation. To counter this and reassure landlord's packages of support with a number of communities based services (Floating support, peripatetic services etc.) need to be built around people on a case by case basis.

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Extern commends SP for his foresight to recognise that those who need services can access them in a timely manner and that the services are responsive to individual need.

Extern would concur that issues pertaining to drug and alcohol addiction and mental health issues are impacting across the sector – so joined up thinking and working is required. “Improving mental health services is a key government priority. Housing and housing support services are considered to be a central part of an effective recovery pathway for people with mental health need”. (p.31)

Summary

In summary the ability of SP to provide flexible and responsive services continues to have positive outcomes for service users. In terms of those with complex needs specialist services can and do make significant impact on outcomes for service users both within temporary accommodation and in the community. Continued assistance to access training through SP budgets will help providers to react and respond to the changes ahead and to become more specialised in dealing with the complexities they face. Services must be encouraged to increase their tolerance and skill set in working with complex cases. Skilled, interested and knowledgeable Staff is the key to enabling others to improve their personal outcomes and live successfully in the community. As community becomes the focus of health care, Services within the housing arena need to be equipped to utilise health and social care resources effectively to ensure that marginalised groups do not become increasingly marginalised and fall between services resulting in a return to homelessness.

The consultation document is readable, focussed, clear and relevant. The proposals are commendable and hopefully deliverable.

“Our vision is that there is sufficient and suitable housing related support services for vulnerable people so that they can live as independently as possible in their own communities.”

Extern supports this positive Supporting People vision.