Consultation Response

Shelter's response to the SEU consultation on Tackling Social Exclusion: Taking stock and looking to the future

April 2004

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Response To Questions For Discussion

Shelter welcomes the opportunity to comment on the future work of the SEU, please see our response to some of the set questions below.

Tackling causes of social exclusion

1) Who are the most vulnerable groups at risk of social exclusion? Are the right policies in place to support them, and are they reaching the right people and areas?

Homelessness, bad housing and insecure housing put people at a high risk of social exclusion. Not only can bad housing be an underlying cause of poor health, education and personal development but it can also result in people being excluded from general service provision or more specialist support services. More work could be done to establish the links between these factors and the extent to which one issue exacerbates another. For example, the extent to which living in temporary and insecure accommodation impacts on not having a school place or the extent to which people with mental health issues are unable to access decent and secure accommodation. A Shelter study on families living in temporary accommodation in nine local authorities found that although there were twenty-one Sure Start services in operation in those areas, only a fifth of families were accessing this service[1].

Pathways into social exclusion are mitigated by housing problems and housing problems and homelessness can act as a significant barrier out of social exclusion. Government recognises this and has put some policies in place to address this. For example, the decent homes standards and the B&B target. However these policies are not sufficient to address the problem. Shelter's experience as a service provider and our research shows that we are a long way from a position where everyone has the opportunity of a decent home. Greater commitment from government to make housing need a priority will be required to stop bad housing and homelessness exacerbating social exclusion. Good quality, secure accommodation can give people a stable base from which to address any additional problems they may face.

Hardest to reach

2) Of all vulnerable groups who are the hardest to help and why? How can we make policy and delivery more effective for this group?

People with profound and multiple needs are the hardest to help – this means they can be difficult and expensive to help. Some are labeled 'service resistant' for different reasons. The service being delivered may not be appropriate, flexible or wide ranging enough to meet specific individual needs or they may be excluded from a service as a matter of policy.

Vulnerable people can be excluded through policies and practice. For example, lettings policies barring people who have had rent arrears or been deemed to be anti-social. Statutory agencies may also use their discretion and choose not to help people who will impact on them meeting other demands and targets.

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[1] The Shelter survey on families living in temporary accommodation will be published June 2004.

Vulnerable people can experience difficulties accessing services for a wide range of reasons. For example, not all services meet the needs of all communities they are meant to serve. Research carried out in Hackney for their homelessness strategy, found that some BME groups were not using homelessness services because waiting in a waiting room was problematic for people from certain cultures.

Life chances
3) Are a focus on prevention and early intervention the most effective ways to break the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage? What else can be done?

Prevention is a good way to prevent intergenerational exclusion – however on many issues, the extent to which there is a distinction between prevention and addressing the current problem may be spurious. The best way of stopping future generations suffering from social exclusion because of the circumstances of their parents is through interventions that address the exclusion of the current generation.

For example addressing the current housing crisis is by the nature and scale of the problem a long-term objective – however the imperative for addressing this issue is that it impacts across generations.

In addition, the provision of a suite of services and programmes should be delivered for different age groups with an acknowledgement of the distinct range of problems that people may face throughout their life.

Mainstreaming
4) How can we get the incentives right to encourage mainstream services to help the most disadvantaged people and areas? What else could be done?

Many of the current drivers for mainstream service provision mitigate against working with vulnerable or excluded individuals. Performance indicators and other measures can discourage service providers from taking risks.

One example is the issue of rent arrears. Local authorities and housing associations have performance indicators for rent collection, as it is important for social landlords perform well in this area. However rather than an emphasis being placed on landlords working with tenants to find solutions to their rent arrears problem, we are concerned that these performance measures encourage the use of eviction and exclusion as management tools not only to reduce rent arrears but also manage the risk of future rent arrears. This means that many people with the greatest need for social housing are not able to access it, which blocks their path out of social exclusion. This issue and recommendations for alternative methods to tackle the problem of rent arrears are outlined the Shelter report, *House Keeping*[2].

Another example is in the area of drug treatment. Some of Shelter's clients who are or have been sleeping rough have difficulty accessing drug treatment because agencies' criteria assess potential clients 'motivation'. The measurement of motivation is acting as a

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[2] Shelter report, House Keeping – preventing homelessness through tackling rent arrears in social housing, Jenny Neuburger, 2004

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barrier for many potential clients, who fail to compete with drug users who may be more adequately housed with better support systems.

The SEU should carry out an audit of performance frameworks for key services to ensure that they do not discourage agencies from working with vulnerable clients. It may be necessary to consider additional performance measures that counteract any perverse consequences of existing measures. For example to counteract the effect of the current rent arrears performance indicator, a performance indicator for tenancy sustainment should be introduced. This could be based on the number of tenants evicted as a proportion of all current lettings and should encourage social landlords to keep this figure as low as possible through effective housing management and the provision of tenancy sustainment services.

The introduction of a high level PSA to give focus and priority to the Governments work in tackling disadvantage and social exclusion could help ensure that vulnerable people are not excluded from mainstream services.

Successful policy and delivery

Overall we support the approach that the SEU has taken, of evidence based policy making and an emphasis on joint working. However more needs to be done, and further resources are needed to ensure this is translated into practice more widely.

It is essential that tackling social exclusion is given a much higher priority across Government and that the agenda is given senior level political leadership. There also needs to be much stronger accountability and commitment to implementation from individual departments. Although the SEU has worked effectively across Government to bring together different department's policy and activity to address specific problems - too many SEU recommendations in the past have not been taken forward when implementation is passed back to parent departments. Government Departments' priorities must reflect the Government's commitment to addressing social exclusion. We welcome the fact that the SEU will be working with departments to audit spending review plans for their impact on social exclusion, deprivation and wider inequality.

In addition the Governments work on social exclusion and child poverty needs to be more closely linked. At present these two elements are directed from different parts of Government. Proofing departmental spending plans against social exclusion objectives is a very welcome development but the same principle needs to be applied to the development of policy more generally. As outlined in our evidence to the select committee on child poverty, all policies should be 'poverty proofed' before they are introduced.

8)How could we better recognise progress/policy success in working with vulnerable groups, for example intermediate or 'soft' outcomes?

As acknowledged in the discussion paper there is a need to factor in some form of recognition that people who are vulnerable will not always succeed in terms of 'hard' service delivery objectives. 'Soft' outcomes could be measured by the length of time a person maintains engagement with a particular service or programme. Wherever possible services should be tailored to the needs of the individual or be as flexible as possible to give them the optimum chance of staying with the service. However if disengagement is unavoidable assurances could be given that a line of communication will remain open if a

person wants to rejoin the service or programme at a later date. To help engage people, dropping out should not be viewed as failing. Maintaining a link with people who have dropped out of the scheme could also be a measurement of success.

9) How can we increase eligible groups' participation in available services/programmes? How can we reduce barriers to access and help prevent people dropping out of programmes?

Services should be designed wherever possible to meet individual needs. This is because people with multiple needs will determine their own priorities based on what is most important to them at a particular time. If a person is homeless for example, then addressing their housing need could be their main priority. This may limit the importance that they place on gaining employment or training. People in housing need should be encouraged to embark on a New Deal programme, for example, but the programme must recognise the different priorities that individuals face.

Programmes and services should not be so rigid that they set people up to fail. Flexibility, which could include a reduction in the number of times a person makes contact with a programme or enables people to alter meeting times, would not only encourage people to participate but could also prevent people from dropping out.

People with complex multiple needs require a seamless service that can respond to all their needs in a holistic way. Instead service provision is often fragmented with people being passed from one service to another which means that it is not only confusing for the individual but also often means some needs will not be addressed.

10) How can we ensure that area-based initiatives are best used to tackle the various types of disadvantage experienced by some of the most socially excluded people in a holistic way?

The Neighbourhood Support Fund initiative is a good example of how small scale projects work imaginatively with young people and in particular helps them achieve a more positive outlook on life. Similar projects could be incorporated for other disadvantaged groups identified within a local area and projects could be extended to incorporate other functions once relationships have developed. Additional functions could include training and employment options for example.

Links should be established between the local project and mainstream services to exchange information on what works. This could be through formalised meetings between the relevant local authority departments, relevant specialist agencies and even national agencies. This exchange between the different agencies should improve the awareness of the different needs of the individuals that local projects are working with. In this way small scale projects could be used as an information base to identify other services that may be required in the local area or help improve mainstream national services.

Future challenges

We welcome the analysis in the report about future challenges, in particular the recognition that current levels of homelessness and structural trends in the housing market will be key issues in addressing social exclusion and inequality in the future.

Three key issues that must be tackled in the Governments future agenda in addressing poverty are:

- Addressing the structural factors in the housing market which exacerbate inequality and increase homelessness, in particular the shortage of affordable housing in many parts of the country. The latest Shelter Housing Investment Project Report[3] outlined that an additional £3.5 billion of government funding is required to meet the shortfall of affordable homes needed each year.
- Reducing policies and practice that exclude people from key public services and block people's routes out of social exclusion.
- Ensuring that the benefits and opportunities for addressing the support needs of vulnerable people presented by the Supporting People are maximised.

With regard to future risks beyond 2004 we believe that the SEU should also focus on the social exclusion of people seeking asylum and refugees and the impact of separating certain groups from mainstream housing provision. Emphasis must be placed on establishing services that promote diversity and integration.

Shelter Policy Unit
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[3] Building for the future - Update 2004, Shelter