

Consultation Response

ODPM: possible future homelessness data collection (P1E) and dissemination changes

From the Shelter policy library

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Shelter

Shelter is a national campaigning charity that every year works with over 100,000 people. Shelter has two aims. One is to prevent and alleviate homelessness by providing information, expert advice and advocacy for people with housing problems. Our second aim is to campaign for lasting improvements to housing-related legislation, policy and practice. Our services include:

- A national network of over 50 housing aid centres.
- Shelterline, our free, national, 24-hour housing advice service, which has recently received the Telephone Helplines Association Quality Mark.
- Shelternet, our free, online, housing advice website.
- The government-funded National Homelessness Advice Service, which provides specialist housing advice, training, consultancy, referral and information to other voluntary agencies, such as Citizens Advice Bureaux and members of the Federation of Information and Advice Centres, which are approached by people seeking housing advice.
- A number of specialist projects promoting innovative solutions to particular homelessness and housing problems.

Summary

1. We are of the view that there is a strong case for the introduction of case by case database for collecting homelessness data and the ODPM should make it a priority to look into how such a system could be introduced.
2. The P1E data collection should record more information about homeless applicants who have not been accepted as being homeless and in priority need by local authorities.
3. We particularly welcome the proposals to record information about repeat homelessness and preventative action. We also welcome proposals to record dual reasons for priority need and loss of last settled accommodation and more information about the age of applicants and the number of children in households in temporary accommodation.
4. We recommend that the ODPM look at how incentives or penalties could be used to improve the consistency of completion and return of P1E forms by local authorities.

Introduction

We welcome the Government's consultation on changing the way in which homelessness data is collected from local authorities. We believe that this consultation is timely given the

recent changes in homelessness policy following the Homelessness Act 2002 and the publication of More than a Roof. We would also welcome the opportunity to comment on the new draft P1E when it is available

Shelter recently published an analysis of P1E data from 2001/2 contained in the report More than a Number¹. The report included in depth analysis of a number of aspects of the P1E dataset. It also made recommendations for areas of further research and changes to the way in which the data are collected including:

- Recording information about repeat homelessness
- More detailed information about households that apply as homeless but are not accepted as being homeless unintentionally and in priority need.

Non- statutory homelessness

Shelter believes there is a strong case for recording more information about all homeless applicants, not just those accepted as being homeless unintentionally and in priority need. Local authorities' homelessness strategies are required to look at the need for accommodation and support for all homeless people in their area, as well as making an assessment of likely future levels of homelessness. The recording of information about applicants who are not accepted by local authorities is essential to developing a comprehensive strategy. Local authorities would collect the information needed to provide this data through the process of assessing applications. It is simply a question of recording it. Shelter's survey of local authorities on their implementation of the Homelessness Act found that the lack of robust and complete sources of data hindered their progress in formulating local homelessness strategies.² This information would also be important in informing National policy.

Improved recording of P1E data

There also needs to be more accurate and fuller completion of the P1E forms at local authority level, as well as a more consistent use of categories across local authorities.

One of the constraints in conducting the analysis in More than a Number was the inconsistent level of reporting from local authorities, and the varying quality of data supplied. There is also inconsistent use across local authorities of the different categories on the P1E form. In particular, the use of the vulnerability categories to record reasons for households being found to be in priority need varies. For example, households fleeing domestic violence with dependent children may in some authorities be accepted on the basis of having dependent children, and in others, on the basis of fleeing domestic violence.

We recommend that the ODPM looking at incentives or penalties to encourage better completion of the P1E form by local authorities.

Response to specific proposals

1. Repeat homelessness

We welcome the proposal to record repeat homelessness through P1E. There is evidence from Scotland that a significant proportion (27-29%) of people applying to local authorities in Scotland for homelessness assistance have been homeless before. There is emerging evidence from some local authorities in England that similar proportions of applications to local authorities are also cases of repeat homelessness. More than a Roof highlighted the need to improve information about repeat homelessness and we welcome moves to address this through P1E data collection.

In order to inform policy, it will be important that data are collected about the reasons for a repeat application as well as the numbers of repeat applications.

The consultation paper suggests collecting information about the reasons for the loss of repeat applicants last settled home. However this will not provide information about the outcome of the previous homelessness application. Understanding trends and regional variations in the outcome of previous homelessness applications will be particularly important in addressing repeat homelessness as well as the reason for the loss of their last settled home. Research from Scotland showed that repeat applications occurred in three main circumstances:

- Applicants who returned to the accommodation from which they made their previous application.
- Applicants who found their own accommodation following their last application.
- Applicants who had been rehoused by a local authority or registered social landlord following their last application.

This kind of information would not be captured by recording loss of last settled accommodation alone. Shelter recommends that a specific question about repeat applications should be included in the data collection capturing information about the outcome of the previous application. In developing categories of reasons for a repeat application the ODPM should refer to the Scottish Executive research³ and information from local authorities homelessness reviews and strategies.

Another important issue is that of longer term repeat homelessness, where adults applying as homeless have experienced homelessness as children. However we are not

of the view that information about this should be captured through P1E data collection, it would be more appropriate as a topic for a research project.

2. Annual supplement

We would support a move to merge the annual supplement with the main quarterly P1E. More detailed information about household type would be extremely valuable at a national and regional level as well at a local level for service planning.

3. Ethnicity

We welcome the proposal to record ethnicity on the same basis as in the Census. This will enable more complete analysis of over and under representation of different ethnic groups within homelessness acceptances.

4. Preventative action

Shelter has welcomed the greater emphasis that both the Government and local authorities are placing on the prevention of homelessness. Additional funding for homelessness services from the ODPM has been linked to authorities achieving positive outcomes on homelessness in addition to the Government targets on reducing the use of B&B and rough sleeping. One of these is for local authorities to reduce the number of acceptances against the main causes of homelessness in their area. While it is true that lower acceptances will be an outcome of preventative action, there are other reasons why a reduction in homelessness acceptances can occur:

- A reduction in homelessness for other reasons, such as changes in the housing market;
- Changes in policies and procedures which reduce applications or acceptance decisions but do not prevent homelessness, which could be described as demand management.

Shelter is concerned that measuring local authorities' performance on the basis of the level of homelessness acceptances could create incentives for changes in practice to manage demand rather than actually preventing homelessness. Relying on acceptances as a measure of performance could also result in local authorities being penalised as a result of a growth in demand in their area even if their performance at preventing homelessness improved.

We therefore welcome the proposal to record information about preventative action. Local authorities should already collect information about the numbers of people in their area who are given advice and assistance, whether by an in-house service or through a voluntary agency, because they are at risk of homelessness. The key issue will be the

consistent recording of outcomes of such action. Data collection would require clear definitions of what constitutes preventative action and the outcomes of that action. Recording outcomes from the provision of advice can be difficult as clients of advice services do not always maintain contact after they have been advised and it is therefore not always possible to know whether the advice has prevented homelessness or not. However in many circumstances where someone is at risk of losing their home, such as relationship breakdown, rent arrears, or landlord possession action, where contact with the client is maintained the outcome can be monitored.

Setting up a system where local authorities recorded the fact that preventative action was being undertaken, either prior to or at the point of a homelessness application, and the outcome of that action could provide a more suitable framework for monitoring performance than trends in acceptances. Performance could then be measured on the basis of how many cases of preventative action were undertaken, relative to applications and acceptances, and on the proportion of those cases that resulted in homelessness being prevented.

The Association of Housing Advice Services has been commissioned by the ODPM Homelessness Directorate to carry out research to develop performance indicators for housing advice and homelessness prevention. It is likely that this research could provide useful ideas for monitoring prevention through P1E data collection.

5. Age of applicants

Information about the age of applicants and members of their households would provide valuable information about homelessness needs. We are of the view that it would not be necessary to record this on a quarterly basis and that periodic snapshots from a representative sample of local authorities would provide adequate information.

6. Dual "Priority Need" Groups and "Loss of last settled Home"

Shelter would support moves to record more than one reason for a household's priority need or loss of last settled home. We agree that under the current system it is likely that useful information about a household's circumstances and the reasons that lead to them becoming homeless are not being collected.

7. First contact point

Local authorities should already record information about how people are being referred to them for homelessness assistance. We do not see this as being difficult information to collect. Given the Government's focus on encouraging a more joined up approach to the delivery of local services it would be helpful to be able to monitor the service routes to

homelessness applications nationally and over time. We would welcome collection of data on the first point of contact of applicants.

8. Number of dependent children

Given that homelessness can have a particularly profound effect on families with children we would welcome the proposal to start collecting information on the numbers of dependent children in households in temporary accommodation. This information would be particularly valuable in planning housing provision. There is evidence that in some areas larger homeless households face particularly protracted stays in temporary accommodation because of the shortage of available lettings in appropriately sized permanent housing. Local authorities and Regional Housing Boards could use information about the numbers of children in households in temporary in planning new affordable housing provision.

This information would also be useful for monitoring the Government's progress in addressing child poverty. Housing and homelessness is a significant aspect of child poverty and Shelter has been making the case for a housing poverty index to form part of the overall measure of child poverty that the Government adopts for measuring its target of ending child poverty by 2020. A housing poverty index should include the numbers of children in homeless households in temporary accommodation.

We would favour an approach where data was collected about the numbers of households in temporary accommodation with one, two and three or more children.

9. Case by case database

We are of the view that there is a strong case for the introduction of a case by case database for collecting homelessness data and that the ODPM should look into how such a system could be introduced.

A major limitation of the existing system is the fact that it is not possible to cross-tabulate data. This severely restricts the extent to which the data can provide information about the causes of homelessness. We believe that there would be significant benefits for national and local homelessness policy development by adopting a case by case system. In investigating how this could be done the ODPM should look at how the Scottish Executive has implemented this approach. Useful learning might also be gained by looking at the CORE system that the Housing Corporation operates for monitoring trends in housing association lettings and rents.

End Notes:

- 1 Meth F. & Wrigglesworth, R. (2003) More than a number. London: Shelter.
http://www.shelter.org.uk/images/pdfs/campaign/ODPM_stats_01to02report.pdf
- 2 Credland, S. (2003) Local Authority - progress and practice, London: Shelter
<http://www.homelessnessact.org.uk>
- 3 Pawson, H. et al (2001) Repeat Homelessness in Scotland Edinburgh: Scottish Executive