Social Policy & Society 8:1, 1–11 Printed in the United Kingdom
© 2008 Cambridge University Press doi:10.1017/S1474746408004533

Not Going It Alone: Social Integration and Tenancy Sustainability for Formerly Homeless Substance Users

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This article draws on findings from a study of a specialised tenancy support service for homeless substance users in a Midlands city, and contributes to debates about what makes solutions to homelessness sustainable. Two approaches to tenancy support are examined: first, a resettlement model based on risk management; and, second, a restorative model which prioritises support that enables people to rebuild their lives in a more holistic sense. Conclusions point to a need for a broader training for tenancy support workers and a funding level that enables them to stay with their clients long enough to facilitate this fuller restoration.

Approaches to tenancy support for formerly homeless substance users

This article uses evidence from research on the work of a tenancy support team run by a housing association in a Midlands city to increase understanding of how different patterns of housing support contribute to the long-term resettlement of formerly homeless substance users who live in independent accommodation. It has long been recognised that 'simply putting a roof over someone's head does not always solve his or her homelessness' (DTLR, 2002: 7; NAO, 2005: 29). Sustainable solutions to homelessness require a range of housing support services to prevent tenancy breakdown and a return to the streets. This is especially true for single homeless people with mental and physical ill-health, substance use and other complex needs, which Randall and Brown (2003: 11) have estimated to be half the relevant population, though others have suggested that the proportion of problematic drug users alone might be as high as four fifths (Fountain *et al*., 2003). However, the most effective combination and delivery of services has remained a matter of debate. Is tenancy sustainability just a question of risk management, or does it require a fuller restoration of people's identity, self-worth, personal relationships and supportive social networks? This article will compare the relative effectiveness of these two models of tenancy support.

In pursuit of permanent resettlement, the Government's Rough Sleepers Unit (RSU) funded Tenancy Sustainment Teams (TSTs) 'to improve the quality of tenancy support services provided to former rough sleepers living in RSI [Rough Sleepers Initiative] accommodation, and to reduce levels of abandonment and eviction from those tenancies' (Lomax and Netto, 2007: 16). Tenancy support involved assistance with generic independent living skills, specialist support for those with problems arising from mental ill-health or substance use and, significantly, help 'to engage in "meaningful occupation" to reduce potential isolation and boredom, and to establish social and community

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746408004533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

networks' (ibid.: 13). Thus the value of supportive relationships in tenancy sustainment was recognised. However, despite a resettlement model that appeared to go beyond risk management, this recent evaluation of the TSTs' work could provide little evidence of success in pursuing more holistic goals.

The RSU's tenancy support work was largely limited to London, but a far more extensive programme of housing support is provided by the Government's *Supporting People* (SP) programme. Since 2003, SP has been seeking 'to develop and sustain an individual's capacity to live independently in their accommodation' (ODPM, 2004: 2). Its services have extended to 1.2 million vulnerable people, including formerly homeless people. In their overview of housing support services that might potentially attract funding from SP, Pleace and Quilgars argued that resettlement should 'help homeless households secure suitable accommodation ... enable the development of daily living skills ... [and] support and enable the development of personal and social skills that will allow reintegration into social and economic life' (2003: 9). Depending on the level of need, services can be delivered through supported housing or through 'floating support' provided by workers at clients' own accommodation. This more holistic approach to resettlement seems to have been born out in SP's review of good practice in housing support (CLG, 2007) and its more recent review of floating support services (CLG, 2008). In this latter study, issues about the limits of tenancy support are raised – to which we will return – especially its duration, the complexity of needs that can be addressed and the risk of promoting new kinds of dependency.

Outside the SP programme, others have also studied what makes a sustainable tenancy. Seal (2005: 14) rejects the 'good housekeeping' model of resettlement prevalent in the 1980s for reducing it to a purely practical issue of teaching homeless people how to cook and manage a budget. Instead he prefers to see resettlement as a process of change, arguing that housing is unlikely to be sustainable unless change has occurred on at least one of the following levels: cognitive, in being able to make rational choices, e.g. about where to live; emotional, in developing positive feelings about ourselves, other people and our circumstances; and practical, in reviving old skills and learning new ones (ibid.: 25). However, he goes on to highlight other components of effective resettlement, not least of which is the establishment of supportive social networks. For instance, he refers to Tavecchio and Thomeer (1999) who show the importance of alternative social networks in the sustainability of solutions to homelessness for young people who have run away from abusive families. Others have also pointed to lack of 'conviviality' as an important cause of tenancy breakdown. Lemos (2000) reminded us that homeless people, like everyone else, want love and friendship and, if the only place they get it is on the streets, then that is where they will return.

Such findings remain relevant where homelessness is compounded by complex needs. For instance, the sense of community between residents and support workers in a supported housing facility for homeless people with long-term mental health issues (Bowpitt and Jepson, 2007), and in a scheme for 'hard to house' drug and alcohol users (Gurstein and Small, 2005), was shown to be crucial in sustaining the tenancies of residents who move into independent accommodation. Moreover, in a comparison of support workers' and service users' views of good practice in the support of homeless drug users in Scotland (Neale and Kennedy, 2002), service users laid greater emphasis on emotional and relational issues. The authors concluded that 'good practice is not simply

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746408004533 Published online by Cambridge University Press

about providing permanent accommodation or ensuring abstinence from drugs. It is also about helping homeless drug users to achieve stability, feel safe and secure, meet new friends, and grow in confidence and self-respect' (ibid.: 204).

Beyond the field of single homelessness, evidence is emerging that much of the success of rehabilitation projects in preventing homelessness for families with anti-social behaviour hangs on workers spending time building relationships of trust with families (Nixon *et al*., 2006). However, the evidence we have reviewed on effective approaches to housing support for homeless substance users suggests that, despite the apparent enthusiasm in programmes like SP for a holistic approach to resettlement, service providers seem more successful in delivering the practical support associated with a risk management model. This might lend support to the conclusions that Homeless Link drew from its recent study that independent accommodation should be limited to service users who are free of illicit drugs and only use prescribed substitutes, while supported accommodation should be the option for continuing illicit drug users, especially those deemed 'chaotic' (2007: 19, 26). Our study will subject this conclusion to critical investigation by seeking to show that tenancy sustainability is possible, even for continuing substance users, if a more holistic approach to tenancy support is adopted.

The study of the tenancy support team and its work

Our study evaluated the work of a tenancy support team (TST) associated with a day centre for street drinkers and substance users ('the Centre'). We recognise that the small scale of the study makes generalisation inappropriate, but believe that distinct features of the TST enabled our study to provide a valuable addition to existing knowledge about tenancy sustainment. The TST operated a particular model of working with homeless and vulnerably housed people with various special needs, whereby the same team that ran the Centre also delivered the tenancy support service (Crane and Warnes, 2004). The Centre also provided drop-ins for service users and facilities for TST events. The aim of the TST was to provide support to substance users to enable them to sustain their accommodation. Service users had independent tenancies, and neither these nor their access to tenancy support were conditional upon their agreeing to eliminate or even control substance use, though their decision to access the tenancy support service indicated a desire to address perceived threats to their tenancies. Our research sought to discover the factors that contribute to tenancy sustainability, and to examine the Homeless Link (2007) claim that independent accommodation is unsuitable for continuing substance users.

The research was undertaken between October 2005 and September 2006 by a small research team comprising two employees of the housing association and a service user. Data sources included 13 semi-structured interviews, eight with service users, three with TST members and two with people in management positions, together with service monitoring records over the relevant period. The service user sample was a convenience sample derived from those who responded to an invitation. Although this recruitment method was likely to appeal to those more favourably disposed to the service, it attracted respondents better able to detail the benefits they derived from it. The staff members were purposively selected as those best positioned to answer the questions of interest to the researchers.

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The interviews with service users sought to explore the contribution of the TST to the sustainability of their tenancies, their emotional health and success in looking after themselves, aspects of social integration and the management of substance use. The interviews with staff and managers were then informed by the themes that emerged from the interviews with service users, thereby giving them a degree of control over the research agenda. Monitoring data were then used to provide a profile of the service users who took part, and some objective corroboration of the experiences conveyed in the interviews.

The eight service users that took part in the research were fairly typical of the 36 clients of the TST at the time. There were three women and five men and their average age was 37. All were White and all but one was White British. All but two had previous experience of homelessness, ranging from five months to 11 years. All but one had had previous tenancies, up to four in two cases. The research participants had been TST clients for just over two years on average. They typically received weekly visits from their support workers.

Clients who felt able to sustain their tenancies independently of the TST ceased to be service users, normally by mutual agreement with their support workers. On this basis, the service could be judged a success. The purpose of the research was to identify the ingredients of this success. Two explanations will be advanced, one based on an approach to resettlement that is seen mainly in terms of the management of risk, the other based on the restoration of positive relationships and social networks. Restoration has long been associated in penology with the concept of restorative justice, which refers to a way of responding to crime that repairs the harm done and restores relationships between offenders, victims and other stakeholders (Colson, 2000; Johnstone and Van Ness, 2007). With homeless substance users, we are using the term slightly differently, looking at the reparation of the harm done to health and self image, and the restoration of relationships with family, community and wider social networks.

Tenancy sustainability and the management of risk

In the risk management model, the ultimate risk is a return to homelessness and the purpose of tenancy support is to use a range of skills and services that effectively prevent this. Homelessness may be triggered by eviction for non-payment of rent, anti-social behaviour or poor household management. Alternatively, tenants may simply abandon their tenancies. We would therefore expect effective tenancy support to emphasise managing conflicting demands on limited budgets. Chief among these will be the pressures arising from uncontrolled substance use. Additionally risks to health may arise from patterns of substance use and poor diet.

Service users in our study were well aware of the precariousness of their tenancies.

> For two weeks, I didn't pay any rent and then I got an eviction notice . . . I was like panicking cos I'd only just basically got the place and this is sort of the last straw . . . cos if I loose that then that's it . . . there's no second chance after this . . . unless I want to go on the streets.

This was reinforced by support workers. 'Let's face it, if the bills don't get paid they will loose the tenancy; it's as simple as that.' Short of losing the tenancy, life could still

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become very uncomfortable. 'If you don't pay anything, they're just going to come round and cut your electric off and cut your phone off and cut your telly off and everything else.'

It is small wonder that budgeting was high on support workers' priorities. A service user described what happens. 'We write everything down, all my bills: electricity, hot water, heating, energy, N Power, water – Severn Trent water – BT, all that.' This wasn't the end of the matter, according to one support worker, because 'with some we have to see [them] on payday and take them to Post Offices and make sure they pay their bills and everything.' Alternatively, 'it's getting as many standing orders set up with people as you can . . . and getting people to understand the concept of standing orders and stuff like that if they've never had bank accounts [before].' Service users were very conscious of the importance of this support. One confessed that 'before, I'd sort of do one, go away on the streets and disappear.' Another admitted that 'if [I] didn't have her there saying you need to pay your bills, you need to do this, you need to do that, I'd probably just not do it.'

Support workers' concerns extended to those aspects of service users' lifestyles that seriously threatened their health. One put it bluntly: 'If I didn't have them [the TST], I'd probably be dead.' Malnutrition was a particularly critical issue, as another service user explained. 'When I came back to [Midlands city] about a year and a half ago . . . I weighed just over six stone, and my boyfriend was just under ten stone.' A support worker explained how the Centre provided a lifeline.

> I think [the Centre] keeps a certain amount of people alive each year. I really do. It provides them with a meal that they wouldn't normally get and there's a doctors surgery down there that they can access the doctor. There's things like the needle exchange, which is massively important in harm reduction.

Managing threats to health from uncontrolled substance use was crucial to overall risk management. One service user got to the nub of the issue. 'I'm a heavy cannabis smoker, know what I mean? I don't buy nothing apart from cannabis, tobacco and rizlas, know what I mean? So it all goes pear shaped.' A service manager elaborated.

> The habit is still there in a lot of cases, so . . . you've got bills to pay, food to buy, but you've still got the same size habit to . . . maintain as well . . . so something's going to give, and in most cases it's the bills and the food that's going to give, not the habit.

The substance use itself had to be controlled, or money management would be little more than a vain hope. This was never simply a question of imposing an abstinence regime unless this was the service user's choice. The aim instead was to empower the user to bring this area of their lives under their own control. Diaries were an important tool to this end, but what was critical was how the diaries were used and what they meant to the service user. Above all, this approach promoted honesty, from the service user that uncontrolled drug use was likely to kill them, and from the support worker that drug use was not going to end overnight. As one heroin and crack cocaine user for ten years explained:

> We got on tenancy support and . . . they gave drug diaries to do. They don't make you; they just say, 'Do you think this might help, so you can see why you're using?' . . . You look back on it and you realise just how much you're using and . . . you sort of see that pattern and it just

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> enables you to change it . . . I don't lie to my support worker. I tell them . . . when I've used, but he's fine with it, cos . . . you're being honest, and from where you've come from to where you are now . . . you've done so much better.

What is emerging is that risk management entailed more than imparting a set of skills in household management and controlling drug and alcohol consumption; the relationship with the tenancy support worker was crucial. As one drinker explained, 'I do things like drinking diaries . . . so I can actually record what I am actually drinking. And it does help having people, just so you know in the back of your mind that, if something did go wrong, then . . . it's only at the end of the phone.' In the next section, we will explore the role that relationships with support workers and wider social networks play in the quest for tenancy sustainability.

Tenancy support and the restoration of lives

One further risk ran much deeper than financial mis-management or uncontrolled substance use. A support worker explained it very succinctly. 'There's one more thing which is even more . . . than anything to do with bills . . . and that's loneliness and people living on their own.' It is what costs service users their tenancies. 'It's that loneliness that is a killer, and it is a killer because it can make people go back to what they were doing before they got into a home.' In short, as a service user explained, 'It's easy to revert back to old ways and back to old friends because you feel lonely.' Homeless people need to restore so much more than their housing, and, if this is not recognised, they will simply return to what sustained them in their homelessness.

So to limit the analysis to the management of risk would be to ignore the bulk of the evidence presented to us on the effectiveness of tenancy support. What we were witnessing was a process of social re-integration involving the restoration of service users' lives, their sense of who they are and to whom their lives matter. This restoration was not just a product of sustaining tenancies: it was intrinsic to its effectiveness. We argue not that risk management strategies were inappropriate, but that they worked only in the context of the restoration of lives and relationships. The part played by tenancy support in nurturing this restoration is the subject of this next section; but we stress that the seeds came from the service users themselves. Four relationships will be examined: with support workers in creating a model for a relationship of healthy inter-dependency, with themselves in generating a new identity and self-image with which to confront the world, with their neighbours and the wider community, and with social networks of which they were part. The role of family will be critically examined in this respect.

Relationships with support workers

Service users without exception held the TST in very high regard. Their non-judgemental acceptance meant that they were still there when service users failed. 'It's nice to know that if I do go over the edge there's somebody there that you can speak to and they're not going to judge you because of what you've done.' They were available when service users needed them. They were flexible in the services provided. 'They do so much to help you . . . Whatever your needs are, they'll just sort of work around you.' Moreover,

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'they'll go out of their way'. And the impact of this consistent helpfulness was potentially life-changing.

> At one time, I honestly thought that there was nothing . . . And then you start coming here and people just want to help you. Everybody wants to help you and you realise that with help you could actually do something, that I could actually turn everything around.

To these support workers, practical help was not just an end in itself but a way of using a relationship to effect change in people's lives by offering a new model of how people might relate to each other. Support workers reiterated the non-judgemental attitude, to the point of being willing to forgive early failures. The Homeless Link study showed that schemes that make continued tenancy conditional upon adhering to drug treatment plans simply increase the rate of eviction and abandonment (2007: 23). To prevent this, service users 'have not got to feel guilty about coming to you and saying that I've not been paying the water and I'm getting threatening letters . . . I think it's about being open and honest with them, not judging them.' Trust was an important element in this approach, as also was allowing the service user to take control of the relationship, 'doing what they want and going at their pace . . . cos it's not about what you think's right for them; it's what they think is right for themselves and what they want to do'. This still recognises the importance of achieving change in tenancy support, but through mutual trust and acceptance rather than coercion.

Underpinning this whole approach was a willingness to do whatever it took to effect the changes that had the best chance of ensuring sustainability. For instance, it wasn't enough to put people in touch with other agencies, as one support worker explained. 'We do a lot of taking people to appointments and things, otherwise they wouldn't get there . . . or . . . they'd forget . . . We keep a record of when people have to go and . . . we take them along.' This is not to suggest a new kind of dependency, a concern frequently expressed with long-term support (CLG, 2008: 26). Rather it is to refute the idea that tenancy support is just a matter of providing resources, teaching domestic skills and generally managing risks. As one service manager explained, it's a long process of 'getting them to trust you [and] you kind of respecting them, talking about the problems, getting open kind of discussions going about [the] sort of problems that they're having and making sure you [are] . . . not doing it for them but helping them to work out the solutions.' Service users clearly valued the relationship with their support workers and wanted it to continue, thereby giving them a motive to work at the issues in their own lives because it would sustain something they valued.

Restoring self-worth

Seal (2005: 25) observed how developing positive images of themselves, other people and their circumstances was crucial to resettlement as a process of change in the lives of homeless people. Our research produced plenty of evidence of a correlation between a positive relationship with a tenancy support worker and an altered self-image that was reinforced by the way others began to see them. Service users described how their support workers 'make you feel human and worth something', because they experienced 'talking to somebody like as a human being instead of judging them'.

Encouragement from tenancy support workers had a direct effect on bringing about this more positive view of themselves and their potential, as was the case with a female

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service user whose support worker suggested she could be a hair model for a hairdresser, as a result of which 'I paint my nails, wear make-up and always condition and blow-dry my hair now.' This improved self-image was noticed by outsiders. A man regularly gave money to this particular service user when she begged in the city centre. When she subsequently said hello to him, he failed to recognise her, and when she explained who she was, he could not believe it and said she 'looked stunning'. She felt this was a measure of just how far she had come and she even had the confidence to seek out a date.

Successfully securing and maintaining a tenancy gave a clear boost to service users' perceptions of themselves, because it gave them an interest that was different from spending their days securing the means to feed a habit. As one service user summed it up, 'I'm proud of my flat now; I've got more respect.' This gave some service users a sense of home, which was a radical achievement for people who may have spent years on the streets. One service user explained what it meant to have

> somewhere to call your own. You know, it's my home ... I would rather be at home cos I've got used to ... my own surroundings, my own bed. If you're hungry, you can get something to eat. If you wanna watch something on television, you know you can watch it; you know you're not out there in the freezing cold ... I wouldn't give it up for the world.

The neighbours and the local community

A further element in sustaining tenancies is to give people an interest, not only in their homes, but also in the neighbourhoods in which they were re-housed. In addition to tackling social isolation, it gives them a valued social network other than their former substance using friends and it further enhances their self-image as local citizens. The Homeless Link study stressed the importance of recovering drug users being able to live away from active users (2007: 21), but there is more to it than this. Service users need to engage positively with their new neighbourhoods, as one explained. 'I didn't [feel part of the neighbourhood] before ... I lived across from muppets who wouldn't think twice about stabbing you in the back. Where I am now, the caretaker always says hello when he sees you.'

Service users described the benefits of things working well. 'I get on with all the neighbours ... I get on with everybody on the road and everybody knows us and it's like not in a bad way; we get on with all of them.' The result is a mutuality that derives from shared interests. 'I've got to know loads of little kids round here ... My house is like a blinking crèche at the weekend sometimes. But I'm getting to know people ... I got a [Christmas] card through the door off one of my neighbours yesterday.' A service manager summed up the benefits of long-term integration into new social networks. 'It's an opportunity to see something else going on in your life ... The more you can integrate people into ... wider community groups, family, friends, community centres, night classes, that kind of thing, the less people are ... seeing the same old [faces].'

Family

Of all the social networks in service users' lives, family had the greatest restorative potential. This is hardly surprising given the role of family breakdown as a trigger for

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homelessness in the first place. Because of this, support workers have to tread carefully. A service manager summed it up well. 'Families [are a] massive support network for people . . . [but] . . . there are cases where the family relationship can be . . . what was damaging in the first place . . . So you have to be a little bit careful with that.' Tackling family issues must therefore be at the service user's initiative. When they do bring it up, support workers will, for instance, help in a search for family members with whom service users have lost contact.

Service users had many stories of successful reconciliations. For instance, re-establishing relationships with lost children was a common fruit of a stable tenancy, as one service user explained.

> I was on the streets, then I had a bed-sit, but I've got two children . . . and I have them every week-end . . . So now that I've got a place, it's a lot more freedom for them as well . . . I done a runner in the past and I've not seen 'em or had contact for months . . . So now it's time to sort of give them a bit more stability . . . to know that . . . they're going to see me on the week-end.

A service manager confirmed the motivating effect that reconciliation with children can have on service users who are struggling to rebuild their lives.

> I have worked with people personally who have been allowed access to their children by their . . . previous partner . . . and . . . it's a huge benefit for them to see their kids for a couple of hours a day . . . because . . . that's the day that everything has to be kept together and you can use that as a worker as a motivation thing. You know, you kept it together that day, why can't you keep it together tomorrow?

Conclusion

In this article, we have used a small-scale study of a support service to deepen our knowledge of how formerly homeless substance users can sustain their tenancies. The limitations of small-scale studies are partly off-set by the distinct features of what was evaluated. We have suggested that, to be effective, tenancy support must enable formerly homeless people to move forward in rebuilding their lives. An exclusive focus on preventing homelessness fails to capture the importance of encouraging service users to have an interest in the future in which relationships are crucial. We have examined the part played by particular relationships – with tenancy support worker, themselves, neighbours and family members. We have found that restored relationships are not merely a beneficial product of sustained tenancies, but are fundamental to the sustainability itself.

These findings have important implications both for the housing options that might be suitable for formerly homeless substance users and for the practice of tenancy support. First, we have opened up the possibility that the right kind of tenancy support can obviate the need for supported accommodation for more challenging groups than has been hitherto supposed (Homeless Link, 2007: 19; CLG, 2008: 43). Further research is needed with clients who disengage with support services to understand better the limits of this approach and the complex needs that it can address. Secondly, if sustaining tenancies involves more than risk management, then support workers will need competencies beyond merely training service users in budgeting, household management and controlling their substance use. They will also need skills in helping their clients to

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see themselves differently and to manage relationships with significant others, not least family members. Thought therefore needs to be given to the training of tenancy support workers through a development of the work that Seal (2005) has begun. But we must also return to our starting point and state the case for the adequate funding of tenancy support that enables support workers to stay with their clients beyond the stabilisation of tenancies until a fuller restoration has been achieved. This is not to commit support services to open-ended financial and professional obligations, but rather to plea for more holistic measures of success in the interests of long-term sustainability.

Acknowledgement

We would like to give our sincere thanks to Natasha Lafond and Neil Stillwell, who helped with the interviewing for this study, and Mark Weinstein, who advised on the methods.

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