Homelessness and COVID-19 Changes in perception and practice

West Midlands Combined Authority

Introduction

The purpose of the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) Homelessness Taskforce has been to ensure that we are drawing on our collective resources to design out homelessness, in all its forms. This means thinking about the risks faced by people and any life circumstances that can lead to homelessness. Our collaboration across the region, across sectors and disciplines, has led us to focus on and tackle the troubled systems that contribute to homelessness and replace with approaches and processes which prevent and design out homelessness. Access to good and trusted support at the right time can act as an important protective factor and the more we are able to keep people in our mainstream systems, the less likely they are to become homeless.

In May 2020, the WMCA Homelessness Taskforce submitted a position paper on the COVID-19 response and next steps to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG)

At that time service providers in the West Midlands had needed to move quickly to offer support and accommodation to every person rough sleeping in the region. This herculean effort led to approximately 1000 people being supported into safe accommodation.

We thought it would be useful to carry out a quick scan of the learning from the response to the pandemic to capture lessons learned which have wider or longer term application. In particular we have collated contextual evidence about the 'systems' changes that have been implemented to sustain any gains made during the pandemic response.

To collate the data we carried out 20 semi-structured interviews with a range of organisations, and service providers across the region.

This is a 'snap shot' of the changes that occurred and we are not able to argue that this small contextual data pool is either wholly representative of, or articulates, all of the learning that is out there. We can argue that it captures some important themes which others will no doubt cover in greater depth in the coming months. The focus of this rapid piece of work was on the response to rough sleeping rather than broader homelessness, though the findings are equally applicable.

Thank you to all those who took the time to take part in the project.

Main findings

As noted above we have chosen to focus more on the systems innovation and learning that organisations have implemented as we believe this may have a longer lasting impact on service delivery.

We are also keenly aware that we will not have captured all the possible learning and if having read this you feel that work you have done is not reflected or we have missed something critical then please let us know.

We have not identified individual areas or services in the text below and have chosen instead to draw out more general points.

COVID-19 has been, and continues to be, an unprecedented event and the ongoing impact of the virus and the response to it will be felt for a considerable time. That impact being felt in terms of both public health and the economy.

The majority of the respondents to this piece of work noted that the pandemic had radically altered their priorities and created a shared 'problem' in which everyone had a stake in the solution, or at least in tackling the challenge. The insights below need to be seen in that light.

There appear to be two main categories of learning; the first focused around how organisations worked with each other and the second on how organisations worked with citizens.

Joint working - a liminal space

The people we spoke to consistently highlighted the importance of, and change in the context of, joint working across services and sectors. The shift to a common and shared set of priorities cannot be underestimated in terms of the change it had on organisational behaviour. The contextual evidence suggests that on the whole, organisations looked outwards and across traditional boundaries in attempting to solve complex issues.

If this is the case then it represents an important shift in organisational behaviour, we might have expected organisations to close ranks and look inwards in an attempt to protect their own boundaries and priorities.

It could be argued that the pandemic created a liminal space in which traditional rules and expectations broke down and key players needed to extemporise and be agile in how they responded in their efforts to find rapid and innovative solutions.

Reassessment of roles and motivations

It was noted by several people that they experienced a significant number of organisations appearing to set aside preconceived, and in some cases negative, ideas about roles, boundaries and organisational motivation in an effort to tackle the challenge of COVID-19.

This appears to have led to more open and collaborative working across boundaries and roles, the assessment of those involved is that this in turn led to the delivery of positive outcomes on the ground.

It is also worth noting that the respondents also mentioned that as the lockdown eased in the early summer that the 'shared space' they had worked in seemed to be diminishing and that there were signs of a return to more traditional organisational behaviour, e.g. boundary and budget guarding.

Practical joint working

In practical terms joint working and practice took many forms, some of which we mention in more detail below.

The examples noted by respondents ranged from daily multi-agency person-centred meetings to help bring everyone in, through to higher level joint working.

Risk sharing and risk reassessment

The feedback from respondents suggests that during the height of the pandemic there was a mutual, and often unspoken, reassessment of which risks were most important - death being a higher risk than data breach.

Data sharing

There are numerous examples of organisations working together and adopting a 'flexible' person centred approach to data sharing. There is no indication that GDPR guidelines were breached but that organisations adopted a pragmatic approach to data sharing arrangements and the associated risks.

The outcome of this shift of emphasis appears to be that there was an effective and often rapid sharing of knowledge about individuals which may have helped to bring them in off the streets quicker, and in some cases helped to keep them in.

Outcome focused

A number of respondents noted that they were able to focus more on the outcomes they needed to deliver e.g. bringing people in rather than on the process elements of their jobs. This increased focus encouraged people to try different ways of working in order to achieve the outcome rather than focusing on process and outputs when they don't lead to an outcome.

Flexible decision making at front end of services

A number of respondents noted that frontline managers and staff felt empowered to make decisions and take actions that they would normally have sought senior level sign off on.

The impact of this appears to have been twofold; firstly encouraging and enabling rapid action helping to minimise needless delays and secondly encouraging and enabling small scale innovation in how services were delivered.

Services in one space

One of the features of the COVID-19 response was the use of hotel accommodation in some areas of the region. There are some notable examples of different organisations enabling their staff to work in the hotel accommodation to the extent that in at least one example a multi-agency team inadvertently came into existence.

There is already a body of evidence that suggests that co-location of services can lead to increased communication and improved joint working - leading to improved outcomes for citizens. It appears that the dividend created by co-location of staff was enhanced by service users being co-located in the same space as the support.

Traditional barriers to engagement, such as it being a significant challenge for people with chaotic lifestyles to keep appointments, travel, etc. were overcome because services could be delivered where people were, not where services wanted them to be.

Services coming to people

The same is true where people were not in hotel accommodation but were asked not to travel as part of the public health response to the pandemic, there are examples of services not noted for their flexible approach to outreach style working, having to embrace that and work with people in their accommodation rather than insisting they attend appointments in service outlets.

People not spreadsheets

A few respondents noted that one of the things they had experienced during the height of the response to the pandemic was a personal realignment of their priorities which reminded them why they do the jobs they do.

As one person put it 'I was reminded that my job is about helping people not about completing spreadsheets'.

Conclusions and recommendations

Clearly organisations, services and individual workers were working under immense pressure and in a highly fluid situation. The shared nature of the challenge and the high priority of the tasks of bringing everyone in and managing the public health risk, appears to have focused organisations on working together to tackle challenges rather than retreat behind their organisational boundaries, which might have been expected.

There is already contextual evidence that this shared space is diminishing and that there is a rebalancing of priorities and a redrawing of old boundaries. We cannot hope to hold on to many of the changes noted above, though there are lessons to be learned that we should attempt to hold on to.

Some of the circumstances of the pandemic response, e.g. use of hotel accommodation are unlikely to be replicated, or indeed may not be desirable for other reasons, however there are some practical lessons that could have longer term benefits.

Part of the remit of the Homelessness Taskforce is to tackle the systemic issues which contribute to homelessness and make recommendations which improve and overcome those system challenges. In effect, to contribute to the thinking on public sector reform. It is therefore with that role in mind that we have collated this learning and make the following recommendations. In making the recommendations to the right, we are cognisant that the responsibility for their delivery lies beyond the remit of the WMCA and the Homelessness Taskforce. As such they are for consideration by the wider network of partners and organisations that have a stake in the prevention and relief of homelessness.

1 Review and redevelopment of data sharing arrangements between partners and service systems in line with the learning from the pandemic and in the context of GDPR.

2 Local partnerships and service systems to undertake reviews and take relevant actions that will maximise shared working, shared outcomes and cross boundary risk sharing.

3 Local partnerships and service systems to review and take relevant actions that maximise the opportunities for embedding co-location and similar options that promote cross agency client centred working.

4 Local partnerships and service systems to review and take relevant actions that maximise the potential for embedding delegation of decision making to frontline staff where it promotes better outcomes and innovation.

The West Midlands Combined Authority Homelessness Taskforce

Who we are and what we do
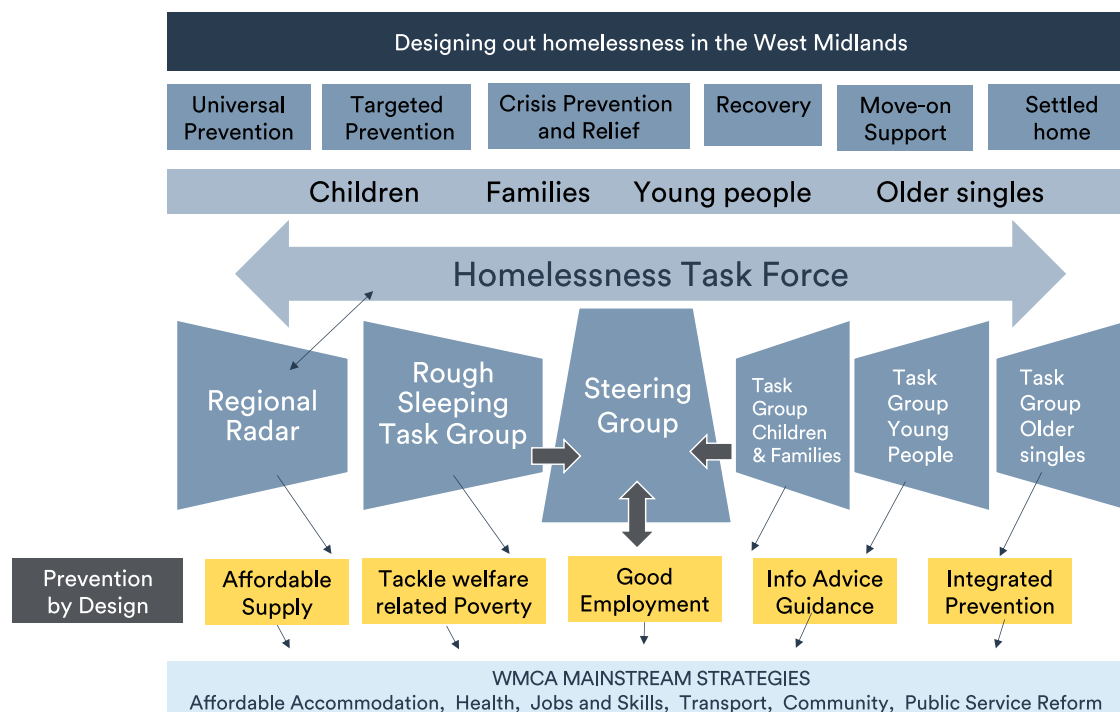
Homelessness is the ultimate exclusion and a tragedy for individuals and for wider society. Following the election of Andy Street as Mayor in 2017, the Homelessness Taskforce was established, with the aim to 'design out homelessness'. The Taskforce was adopted within the mainstream structures of the WMCA in June 2019.

The Taskforce membership includes our seven Local Authorities (Birmingham City Council, Coventry City Council, Dudley MBC, Sandwell MBC, Solihull MBC, Walsall MBC, City of Wolverhampton), key public sector agencies, representation from Voluntary and Not for Profit sector and senior representation from the Business Community. It has an independent Chair, Jean Templeton, CEO of St Basils, and is supported by representatives of each WMCA Directorate.

A senior Members Advisory Group (MAG) comprising Homelessness portfolio holders for the seven local authorities, chaired by Cllr Sharon Thompson, Cabinet Member for Homes and Neighbourhoods in Birmingham, provides oversight, support and scrutiny of the work of the Taskforce, reporting to the Public Service Reform Board of the WMCA.

The WMCA has no statutory duties, powers or resources around homelessness, but in designing out homelessness, is committed to identifying and addressing gaps and flaws in policies, procedures, laws, structures, systems and relationships that either cause or fail to prevent homelessness. It recognises that homelessness takes many forms – rough sleeping, sofa surfing, night-shelters, B&B, temporary accommodation, hostels, squatting, and is a complex mix of personal and wider structural factors, such as health, employment, relationships and housing.

For more information please contact: Neelam Sunder, Programme Manager, Homelessness Neelam.Sunder@wmca.org.uk

West Midlands
Combined Authority