

We discussed the publication of the '[Independent evaluation of the implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act](#)' last week, and in particular the recommendation for local authorities to '*get input and feedback on service user experiences.*' The following provides a summary of our discussion.

## The importance of input and feedback from service users

Most people working within Housing Options will want to ensure that the service they are providing is as good as it can be. However, without feedback of how support is being received, it is likely that approaches that are not working will continue to take place, or worse still that detrimental practices go un-checked. This can have implications for the workplace culture within Housing Options team, which can foster stigmatising attitudes towards people approaching the local authority for support.

*"These people care. They want to help. It's a humanity thing. You want to know what's going on."* **Member of National Advisory Panel**

*"Otherwise you only have one side of the story. If you're not hearing from people who receive services, how is that fair? You won't know what's going on!"* **Member of National Advisory Panel**

*"It's just what they think the service users need... There's a revolving door of putting money in and it's not working. I don't see the point of putting money in and it not working. I see that they need to find out what they need and implement it."* **Member of National Advisory Panel**

*"How many times are things just duplicated? There could be some really big wins."* **Member of National Advisory Panel**

*"It's important if they're genuinely bothered about ending homelessness. Most homelessness agencies can get away with doing a shit job, and because they're analysing their own performance it can continue forever, without really reducing homelessness. No one else is going to challenge it. This stuff is really wrong. This is dishonest and will not help our country."* **Member of National Advisory Panel**

*"You get workers who abuse service users, and none of that would get found out."* **Member of National Advisory Panel**

*"If you're not taking input from people you'll get a self-analysing sector, and staff will keep saying that homeless people are just useless and incompetent and that's why they are homeless."* **Member of National Advisory Panel**

As well as not being able to react to negative practices, a lack of input from people using the service means that knowledge about what would work is not utilised. This means that efficiencies in service delivery and opportunities for saving resources are not taken.

*"When the local authority are looking at savings and efficiency, it's important they get the views of our people. They will get brilliant ideas."* **Member of National Advisory Panel**

*"We can help them make savings ... The temporary accommodation bills - how much have these gone up? Massively - I know in my local area they have."* **Member of National Advisory Panel**

Utilising service-user involvement will bring clear improvement to evaluating the effectiveness of a Housing Options team. It also has the benefit of providing an apolitical analysis of a service, rather than being drawn into political debates about the reasons why local authorities aren't providing an appropriate service to people where this is the case.

*“Local authorities have a political agenda, whoever’s in power. It’s important to get people who are living and breathing and in the service to give their point of view. It gets rid of the politics.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“Politically, it’s good if you’re listening to people and making changes.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

The Panel also raised positive examples of areas where people with lived experience of homelessness are engaged in the work of the local authority. This was the case particularly where good connections had been made with key actors who were able to then call on groups for various engagement events. **We would be happy to provide further detail to support the work of the MHCLG.**

*“In [ ] they do ask for service user feedback. We’ll get invited to various meetings, we’ve met with the Mayor of London, the Rough Sleeping team and various other things. They do listen.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“There’s a chain of people who know each other, and if you’re linked in you’re in. It’s who you know.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“Some local authorities are great, pushing it, great. We need to get a consistency across the country so there is some kind of real involvement, not just focus groups... It’s not about ‘here’s our policy what do you think,’ it’s about creating the policy together.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

## **Barriers to practice**

Despite the clear benefits to ensuring service users have the opportunity to provide local authorities with feedback, as has been noted in the Independent review, many local authorities do not do so, citing resource restrictions and a belief that staff know what service users want.

Our Panel provided further reasons why in their experience Housing Options departments had not sought people’s views. A key reason was fear of having difficult conversations with people, and of finding out truths about work performance. This was felt to be on the whole an unhelpful approach, as there are organisations, including Expert Link, who can and have facilitated productive discussions which work towards a common purpose of improving support.

*“I think they’re scared of what they’re going to hear.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“They might not like what they hear. There might be difficult conversations that need to happen.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“They’ll say they won’t have the resources, but I just think they don’t want to hear those difficult answers. They’re just scared, and they shouldn’t be. There’s so many organisation that can help them. If the local authority here said ‘can you get a panel of experts together?’ we’d say yeah. It would be so easy.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

It was also cited that local authorities can invest too much trust in written policies and procedures which have not been updated and do not take account of staff attitudes towards individuals. These policies could themselves benefit from being designed in collaboration with lived experience of homelessness in the relevant area.

*“It’s a bit like a school with a bullying policy – the headmaster goes ‘there’s no bullying because we’ve got a policy.’ [ ...] They’ve got there policy but they’ve not been updated. ...The policy stands for years, it’s brilliant. But to open up and have people involved, service users and living experience, it bodes fear.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“Ideologically the majority of the workers genuinely believe people deserve to be homeless. That they take drugs as a lifestyle choice. If you’ve got mental health you just need to pull yourself together...They are deeply held ideologies.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

Ultimately, arguments around limited resources are not supporting individuals to meet their aspirations and obtain accommodation. It was felt that local authorities have legal duties to support people, and these need to be met in the fullest.

*“[They say] We don’t have enough money to follow the law so we’ll break the law. The law says you can’t do x y and z – it’s no excuse to continue doing what you shouldn’t be doing.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“The responsibility is down to the local authority. They have specific duties. It’s a cop out [...] It’s a political argument, but you do have a duty. I don’t put my application in to number 10, I put it into [COUNCIL]” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

## **Recommendations for MHCLG and local authorities**

The Panel recognise that data is currently collected by Housing Options, but that MHCLG could potentially scrutinise the data they receive more effectively.

*“Housing Options teams can put whatever they want on their stats and data – is that actually scrutinised by MHCLG?” [...] I think they should scrutinize a bit better and dig into things a bit more.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

The Panel particularly felt strongly that Housing Options need to have mechanism in place to thoroughly evaluate their services so that the work they are doing to end homelessness is as effective as possible. People with lived experience of homelessness within the area must be involved in this process.

Further, it is crucial that evaluations are conducted independently to offer a true insight, and that considerations are made that when organisations are being evaluated, they potentially provide a false impression of how their service is delivered.

*“You should get independent people to get this feedback so it’s honest. If someone’s abusing you, you aren’t going to complain to that abuser because you’re scared.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“What you guys get shown is them on the best day. It’s important to understand there is a whole other side that people experience that is really damaging.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“Do they have contact with people who have had bad experiences? When they visit you can bet that people are cleared out the way. You need to find a way of doing it where services aren’t making it look better than it really is.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

A number of different mechanisms could be adopted:

### **1) Independent peer reviewers from different services (including competitor services) who will have an understanding of the context the service is working in**

*“Peer reviews from other agencies reviewing and assessing could be a good way almost like an appraisal of services” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“Employ independent reviewers from different services with lived experience who are working in the field. But must be independent, be independent to the services that they work for. They [local authorities] need the evidence, and that’s the only way to get it.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“Workers from a competitive service could be that independent worker to assess what the worker says. It’ll give you a bit of a truer liking.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

- 2) Independent mechanisms whereby users of the Housing Options service can provide confidential feedback, such as a hotline or online review portal.**

*“What about a whistleblowing number for people to contact?” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“A lot of people go on google reviews, Facebook groups.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

- 3) Improve the use of the HAST advisors, who bring expertise and authority within the sector**

*“The HAST advisors either come from housing or homeless background. They know what’s going on, but it’s difficult. They need to challenge more. I think local authorities’ Housing Options teams, would listen to them.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

- 4) Adopt a Mystery Shopper approach, involving people with lived experience of homelessness in the area**

*“There should be this mystery shopper. To know what’s going on you should go undercover.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“Mystery shopping exercises are great. Do that a lot here.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“We had the local councillor out with us shadowing, took them into Housing Options. Front line staff talked to her like shit. Frontline staff didn’t have a clue who it was!” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

*“We had young people do mystery shopping in night shelters. Obviously CEOs might not know what’s going on on the ground. The only way to get the truth is to show the truth. The only way to know it is to experience first-hand.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

- 5) Adopt an accreditation scheme, which works with people who have used the Housing Options team to thoroughly evaluate different aspects of the service.**

*“Most services in [PLACE] have an accreditation thing, prove they have psychologically informed environment, etc. We go in and speak to service user group, we’ll go in and speak to people find out how people felt. Do they feel safe? Then they [SERVICE] get a badge to say they’re MD (multiple disadvantages) friendly.” **Member of National Advisory Panel***

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## About Expert Link

Expert Link is a peer led organisation championing the voice of people with lived experience of multiple disadvantages, including homelessness, mental health issues, substance misuse, offending and domestic violence and abuse. We advocate for a world where people with lived experience of multiple disadvantages are treated as equal partners in decisions made about their lives.