The role of housing and housing providers in tackling poverty experienced by young people in the UK

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May 2015
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A review of the literature

Defining poverty

This literature review focuses on projects carried out by housing organisations in the UK, aimed at helping young people in poverty. While initially this might seem like a clearly defined group of activities, there are some definitional issues. Poverty is a concept without a single, consistent definition, even within the UK (Seymour, 2009). The official measure of poverty in the UK is a relative one, set at 60% of the national median income; however, this has been criticised as arbitrary and not reflecting the real situation of households, once housing costs are taken into account. However, there is no consensus on an alternative measure and the extent to which it should focus on financial status (France, 2008). The complexity of the measures sometimes used means poverty may be difficult to measure, requiring detailed financial information about the individual or household.

Despite this definitional difficulty, poverty remains a central issue; it has been argued that without addressing poverty, projects seeking to address social problems in deprived areas may be failing to address the root problem and may not succeed (Taylor, 1998).

The increasing involvement of housing organisations such as social landlords in projects aiming to address community well-being, often called the “Housing Plus” approach, has been noted for some years (Evans, 1998). It is now routine for housing organisations in the public sector to seek to address issues critical to poverty such as financial exclusion, debt or unemployment. But, importantly for this research, few housing organisations in the UK consider reducing poverty to be an explicit goal (Clarke, et al., 2015). Therefore, it may not always be clear the extent to which success in addressing these issues also means success in addressing poverty.

Projects may often:

- Reduce poverty as a by-product of the work, not the primary aim
- Not be evaluated in terms of their success in reducing poverty, but in other terms with varying relevance to poverty, such as number of people rehoused, or reduction in arrears owed to the landlord
- May have an unclear impact on poverty, for example reducing poverty among the organisation’s tenants but potentially increasing it in the wider community

It is also important to distinguish between child poverty and youth poverty; the former has had much policy attention in the UK, but relatively few initiatives have focused specifically on youth poverty (France, 2008). In part because of this, projects which help young people may not always be exclusively aimed at young people. For example, projects aiming to help vulnerable single parents may not be explicitly restricted to young people, but nevertheless may cater almost exclusively to that group in practice.
Availability of literature

The literature publicly available which includes evaluations of projects aiming to help young people in poverty is sparse. It is not that innovative projects of this type do not exist; several studies have identified multiple innovative projects which reduce poverty among young people (Terry, 2011; Foyer Federation, 2011), but these rarely include an evaluation of impact, beyond stating the project’s scale and intended goals. A search of the academic literature and housing organisation websites found only a small number of detailed evaluations had been published, some of which focused on individual projects and others on a range of projects.

Of those which were found, many focused on measuring the level of provision, satisfaction levels among current clients or tenants, perceptions of staff, or the administrative success of the scheme in providing the service. For example, one evaluation of a community regeneration scheme (Coatham & Martinali, 2010) focused almost exclusively on how service provision could be arranged and sustained, rather than the impact of that provision on service users. Another (Foyer Federation, 2011) focused on the experiences and opinions of project staff, and how far they took into account current Foyer Federation guidance, with some case studies of successful client experiences.

Many evaluations did contain assessments of the satisfaction levels of tenants or clients, for example an older assessment of an outreach project (Sim & Brodie, 2000), or a wide-ranging analysis of the provision of services to homeless young people in Manchester (Reid & Klee, 1999). These could be valuable in identifying shortcomings in provision; for example a study of a resettlement service on Merseyside identified important areas for improvement in how the service was provided (Hennessy, et al., 2005). However, none of these systematically compared the situation of clients or tenants before and after the project, hampering the ability to see whether the project itself had an impact on poverty, as opposed to satisfied clients’ expectations.

Most evaluations of individual projects published were also qualitative, for example one evaluation of a YMCA hostel spoke in great detail to a small number of young people about their lived experience of the hostel and how they felt it had affected their lives (Somerville, et al., 2011). While these types of study offer insights into how services work or do not work for clients, they do not provide a method of comparing one service against another.

Only one of the studies of young people found for this literature review (Crane, et al., 2014), an assessment of a resettlement service, considered the impact on clients with the level of financial detail which might be needed to consider the impact on any formal measure of poverty. One other study, of debt advice schemes aimed at a variety of age groups, considered the impact in financial terms, but in this case on landlords via arrears reductions rather than on tenants themselves (Evans & McAteer, 2011). Both of these studies were general evaluations of the outcomes of a type of project rather than an individual project evaluation.

Finally, sometimes organisations prefer to evaluate a group of projects together, drawing overall conclusions about the effectiveness of their work. This may be useful, for example, where individual clients or tenants participate in multiple projects, or where an organisations needs to demonstrate its effectiveness to stakeholders or the general public, but is less useful for identifying particularly successful types of intervention.
To summarise, while there are a limited number of evaluations available which do suggest positive social impacts, the extent of those impacts is unclear and in particular the impact specifically on poverty remains uncertain (Tunstall, et al., 2013).

Reasons for the lack of availability of literature

It is important to emphasise that a lack of published literature does not necessarily mean evaluations are not taking place. Annual Reports of housing organisations frequently contain headline findings of monitoring or evaluation of programmes. This quote from Places for People’s Annual Review 2012-13 is typical:

_We also continued our work on two projects in Bristol: ‘Looking Forward’ and ‘Opportunity Bristol’, which help tenants enter employment, training or volunteering. We worked with 82 people, moving 35 into employment, 20 into further learning or training, and 10 into volunteering or work experience._

Places for People, Annual Review 2012-13

However, the publication of the data or evaluations underlying these statements is rare, and little can be drawn from the outcomes in terms of comparing the effectiveness of different approaches. Even where a more comprehensive approach is taken, it is difficult to draw conclusions regarding poverty if it is not regarded as a focus of the evaluation. For example, a review commissioned by Centrepoint of their activities showed considerable savings to the taxpayer, but did not seek to quantify the impact on client or tenant incomes or poverty (Pro Bono Economics, 2013).

A survey of housing organisations regarding the evaluation of their projects suggested that many organisations did make some kind of assessment of impact, although some of the tools designed to assess social impact relied solely on project staff to judge whether the project caused positive outcomes for individual clients (Wilkes & Mullins, 2012). A separate survey of housing organisations providing schemes to support tenants or clients into employment suggested 63 per cent of providers had some kind of mechanism to measure impact or success (Gardiner & Simmonds, 2012), although the detail of that mechanism was not explored. It is therefore unclear how many of the mechanisms might consist of measures of number of people assisted, or client satisfaction levels, or a focus on outcomes such as finding employment without any consideration of causation.

It is likely, therefore, that evaluations or at least evaluation data for projects do exist, but they may remain in-house unless there is a compelling reason to publish them. For this literature review, copies of evaluation documents for individual projects regarding young people were requested from multiple organisations; A small number felt that these documents were confidential.

The difficulty of carrying out evaluations is also an issue. Challenges outlined in the academic literature include:

- The difficulty of assessing long term impact. Some evaluations, due to data protection or time limitations, can only contact clients during the programme, or immediately after the end of it (Wade & Dixon, 2006).
- The difficulties involved in identifying any ‘control group’ to compare against, making it difficult to attribute causation to the project concerned (Mercier, et al., 1992).
- The impact of other projects, or changes in the political or economic context. For example, some apparent ‘successes’ in finding employment for clients may in fact be
attributable to economic growth (Tunstall, et al., 2013), while some ‘failures’ of projects seeking to find housing for clients may be attributable to reducing social landlord emphasis on housing need, rather than an issue with the project itself (Harding & Willett, 2008).

- The complexity of measuring social impact; even with specialist software tools, the time and resources required can be a significant burden on the organisation (Wilkes & Mullins, 2012).

The key components of an effective evaluation of the impact of a project on poverty among young people are summarised in the chart below.

**Chart 1: Key elements of an effective evaluation**

- Plausible mechanism for impacts claimed
- Consider wider economic/social trends
- Consider other possible causes
- Separate out impacts for each project
- Quantitative where possible
- Consider comparability to other studies
- Gather data relevant to poverty
- Number of people assisted
- Range of people assisted
- Spend on project per outcome
- Causation
- Consider opinion of tenants or clients
- Avoid relying solely on staff opinion
- Include a control group where possible
- Analysis
- Neutral – don’t just consider successes
- Consider comparability
- Gather data after project has ended
- Monitor all, not just completers
- Outcomes, not just satisfaction
- Description
- Purpose of the project
- Activities involved

**References**


