

Review article: Homelessness and Housing Support Services: Rationales and Policies under New Labour

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Introduction

This discussion offers a thematic introduction and contextual framework across the welfare domains of homelessness and employment. The Labour Government (1997–2010) introduced a range of policies, which drew connections between homelessness and employment strategies. Such approaches were indicative of efforts to responsabilise and empower marginalised groups by way of conditional responses, which intended to steer clients towards independent and ‘active’ citizenship. In this context, work-related activities were regarded as transformative and meaningful. In broad terms, this approach can be understood as part of a wider set of therapeutic interventions that aimed to support clients with multiple support needs, albeit through somewhat coercive and regulatory overtones (Harrison and Sanders, 2006). A review of social policies developed under the Labour Government is useful for a critical understanding of welfare approaches and practices during that period, and it also enables us to evaluate how far there is continuity or change in approaches in successive political administrations. Labour introduced a set of policy principles that represented distinctive responses to disadvantaged groups, and this review highlights some of the key rationales and techniques of governance from that era. The conclusion will discuss the potential legacy for welfare policy, with specific reference to the Coalition Government.

This article first outlines some key themes across social policy domains. Some examples are drawn from homelessness policy in order to provide illustrative examples of how discourses played out in practice terms. Next there is a focus on the linkages between homelessness and employment strategies to demonstrate the way that housing mechanisms connect to broader policy rationales and techniques of governance. The conclusion offers further critical reflection on developments in policy and practice under Labour where they connect to the themes of conditionality, responsabilisation and empowerment. At this stage, there is some evaluation of how far homelessness policy under the Coalition Government reflects continuity or change.

Before proceeding, there are two points of clarification. First, it is worth sounding a note of caution. This work represents a largely documentary analysis of ‘official’ policies developed under the Labour Government, and how these appear to have influenced grassroots practices. This type of analysis might risk presenting New Labour as a determined and coherent project, through claims about the motivations of policy actors and Government. The strength of this review lies in the identification of thematic consistencies across homelessness and employment policies; at least at the level of language and

narrative (Fairclough, 2000). Our analysis provides a timely assessment of social policies at the end of the New Labour era and briefly looks ahead to evaluate the continuation of themes under the Coalition Government. Second, the term 'homelessness' is a broad concept. For the purposes of this discussion, homelessness policy refers to strategies for especially marginalised groups. Policies contain assumptions about *who* clients are – socially excluded individuals with multiple support needs, for example mental ill-health, traumatic histories, and substance mis-use – alongside ideas about how best to help them, namely aspirations for clients to achieve settled lives with employment as a potential route to, or outcome of, independent living. Although housing policies connect to homelessness strategies, for ease of discussion we have elected to use the term 'homelessness' alone.

Key themes and discourses

This section covers discourses prevalent across policy domains, with a specific focus on homelessness. This review of thematic consistencies begins to make clear the ways in which specific narratives play out in practice terms and have impacts for clients. Elsewhere policy themes under New Labour have been the subject of in-depth commentary and analysis (cf. Lister, 1998; Dwyer, 2000; Driver and Martell, 2002), and so we provide an overview only. It will be shown that specific ideas underpinned policy approaches, such as the social exclusion agenda and a social contract between citizen and state, and that these themes influenced some changes to the structure and organisation of social welfare services. It is also possible to identify an emerging profile of the 'client' (often referred to as 'customer' by statutory policy documents and providers) as envisaged by 'top-down' policies.

Social exclusion and New Labour

As is well documented, according to the Government 'social exclusion' indicated broad multi-dimensional causes and consequences (unemployment, discrimination, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, ill health and family breakdown) that generated deep, long-lasting and inter-generational problems for people, which affected both society and the economy (Ridge and Millar, 2002). The establishment of the Social Exclusion Unit, its replacement with the Social Exclusion Task Force, and introduction of the 'Adults facing Chronic Exclusion' (ACE) programme was indicative of New Labour's enduring theme of social exclusion and its apparent commitment to tackle social problems. This was further exemplified by a target to end child poverty over twenty years, which was reinforced by evidence that poverty in early years was linked to adult disadvantage. Policy solutions stopped short of redistribution of income through the tax/benefit system. Instead, Government was committed to 'equality of opportunity' as opposed to 'equality' by way of material redistribution (Lister, 1998). Social exclusion strategies became subject to critical commentary, especially where they linked into conditional approaches and welfare-to-work policies. For instance, Levitas (2006) highlighted a 'moralising' component to discourses of social exclusion, where non-engagement or 'failure' to take up 'opportunities' for paid work was reflected in those individuals or communities who were then regarded as a 'moral underclass'. New Labour appeared to perpetuate a narrow definition of social inclusion based on participation in the paid labour market.

Ideas about 'causes' of social exclusion have persistently proved influential for conceptualisations of homeless clients. For example, there were references to 'problem families'. Local authorities reported households who 'constantly move in and out of homelessness, may be involved with social services, in violent domestic situations, be financially poor or in debt' (ODPM, 2003: 11). For these families, traditional responses (such as eviction from social housing) were deemed inadequate, in favour of approaches that tackled 'individual' and 'structural' causes of social exclusion. The 'causes' of social exclusion for rough sleepers also became a primary focus under Labour. Rough sleepers were viewed as facing 'chronic exclusion' as they were leading 'chaotic lives' and had 'multiple needs' (DCLG, 2008).

The social contract and conditionality

There has been an explicit focus on a social contract between citizen and state, perhaps best characterised by the political mantra 'rights and responsibilities' (Blair, 1995; Fairclough, 2000). It has been argued that policy became increasingly conditional under New Labour, with sanctions on public resources for individuals who failed to adhere to standards of behaviour (Dwyer, 2000). The idea of a social contract also draws on concepts of 'active' citizenship, which aims to enable citizens to be more 'autonomous' and independent of the state (cf. Driver and Martell, 2002). Across policies and public services, conditionality strategies were regarded as tools to tackle social exclusion and generate 'active' citizenship. The extension of conditionality was intended to change behaviour, through promoting greater responsabilisation of 'ideal' citizens, which New Labour saw as key for facilitating social inclusion (Dwyer, 2000).

With regards to homelessness policy, Labour's strategies contained assumptions about the possibilities of coercion or 'conditionality' for ensuring clients' compliance with efforts to support them off the streets and/or into employment (Fitzpatrick and Jones, 2005; Johnson and Fitzpatrick, 2010). Conditional approaches were justified on the basis that increased state investment into support services, and the availability of alternative options to street living or 'doing nothing', resulted in heightened expectations that clients take up such 'opportunities'. Managing risk also became a focus of New Labour policies that targeted 'vulnerable' groups, and some have argued that *risk* rather than *need* was a rationale for welfare provision (cf. Kempsall, 2002). UK policies on rough sleeping contained elements of conditionality, even though, as Fitzpatrick and Jones (2005) caution, measures that aimed to coerce clients away from rough sleeping had potential to negatively impact on their wellbeing.

Elsewhere, employment policies occasionally contained traces of rational actor theory and behavioural economics, by discussing the role of financial incentives for behavioural change (for example, reducing benefit levels for non-compliance with support) and laying emphasis on making expectations about 'engagement' with support 'absolutely' clear (cf. Gregg, 2008) to those receiving the 'gift' of provision (Harrison, 1995). These approaches were somewhat individualising, placing emphasis on the individual as site of 'the problem' and possibilities for transformation.

It is noteworthy that homelessness policy and practice reflect an especially interesting focus for analysis of the social contract between citizen and state, because aspects of this approach have long-standing roots in the housing sector. For example, on the one hand,

the social contract encompasses individuals' rights. Local authorities have a statutory legal responsibility, under the Housing (Homeless persons) Act 1977, to rehouse homeless families and unintentionally homeless people who are eligible and of priority need status. Despite these legal requirements, access to services within homelessness policy and practice is often conditional on clients' attitudes, motivations or behaviours that are deemed appropriate, as assessed by local authority or voluntary sector organisations and practitioners at the front-line. There are examples of responses to marginalised clients, which aspire to change their behaviour, and, as such, conditional policies were seen as a way to responsabilise and empower marginalised groups. Practice responses in homelessness services appeared to take on some of these 'top-down' policy narratives. For instance, Whiteford (2010) argues that practices of charging for food in a homelessness day centre reflects a broader policy trend around the responsabilisation of welfare and provision for vulnerable groups.

Connections between homelessness and employment strategies

It is possible to observe connections between homelessness and employment strategies, and this section observes these trends in relation to specific rationales and issues. Homelessness provision under Labour focused on the restoration of *independence*. The resettlement agenda associated with Supporting People funding was seen to promote homeless people's transitions from homelessness into permanent housing and into sustainable paid work. 'Successful outcomes' involved housing, but increasingly this was seen as just one component of resettlement and other factors such as employment were considered important (DCLG, 2008).

Although individualising and responsabilising in parts, policy language appeared to demonstrate an understanding of complex and multiple 'support needs', which were often regarded as interrelated, as for mental-ill health problems and drug addictions (Rough Sleepers Unit, 2000; ODPM, 2003, 2005). In this context, New Labour policies can be analysed as representing a distinctive approach to support that contained a focus on clients' behaviour. Government claimed that just as material increases in state benefits would not necessarily improve lives (Blair, 1995), it would take 'more than a roof' to resolve homelessness and housing need (ODPM, 2003). We see here an interesting combination of individualising approaches, helping strands and an apparent awareness of factors beyond the immediate control of the socially excluded client.

In terms of homelessness policy, the rough sleepers and hostels strategies provide useful insights around themes of conditionality, responsabilisation and empowerment. Policies throughout the New Labour era highlighted distinctive ideas about support for rough sleepers and hostel residents (Rough Sleepers Unit, 2000; ODPM and SEU, 2004; ODPM, 2004; ODPM, 2005; DCLG, 2006; DCLG, 2008). These agendas became a particular focus for Government plans to tackle social exclusion. Labour made explicit their aims to provide 'solutions' to homelessness, through services for especially marginalised clients. Hostels could become 'places of change' for individuals with multiple and complex 'support needs' (DCLG, 2006). Importantly for a discussion about homelessness services, the Supporting People programme was set up to fund housing and homelessness support organisations (ODPM, 2004). Core principles included supporting individuals to achieve or sustain independent living through development of basic life skills and abilities. Supporting People reflected a 'move-on' model for clients, with organisations

categorised into tiers that dictated a level of support and a set timeframe (six months, two years, etc.) to work with clients in order to 'prepare' them for independent living.

Welfare-to-work strategies showed that New Labour's approach to employability incorporated ideas of social inclusion, conditionality and multi-agency (and inter-agency) working. An emphasis on the duties and obligations of citizens to find paid work underpinned welfare-to-work approaches (cf. Dean, 2007) and was evident in the mantra of 'work for those that can, security for those that cannot'. Evidence has indicated challenges associated with the re-entry of marginalised and socially excluded groups into the labour market. For example, the structure of welfare-to-work programmes relied on greater outsourcing to private and voluntary sector organisations and associated regulatory demands (Lindsay *et al.*, 2008). Performance-related targets to encourage those 'hardest to reach' into 'sustainable' paid employment have raised some concerns of 'creaming' and 'parking' of clients, whereby those closest to the paid labour market and with fewer 'barriers' would be helped more (Lindsay and Dutton, 2010).

Policies towards benefit claimants are illuminating for exploring connections between homelessness and unemployment strategies (DWP, 2008a, 2008b; Gregg, 2008). Under New Labour, paid work was regarded as transformative for claimants' physical and mental well-being. Moreover, the 'work first' approach advocated by that Government sought to facilitate social inclusion through paid employment. As well as providing financial and social independence, employment was seen as a route out of homelessness for many. Explanations for unemployment were linked to problems associated with the claimant, such as a lack of skills or poor attitude to job seeking. Conditional strategies emerged as significant. There were expectations that individuals should 'engage' with offers of support (sometimes in the form of intensive case management), with financial sanctions for those who refused to comply. As already noted in this article, policy appeared influenced by some principles from economic theory, such as a 'rational actor model', with regards to how financial incentives could positively influence welfare claimants' behaviour (Clarke and Newman, 1997).

Practices in hostels and day centres for homeless clients became permeated by linkages between Labour's homelessness and employment strategies. There were suggestions that hostels could provide a range of provisions, which included: health interventions, such as GP surgeries; counselling or other interventions, such as cognitive behavioural therapies; in-house alcohol detoxification projects; and key-working and resettlement services (ODPM, 2005). Significantly, therapeutic techniques also encompassed the promotion of 'meaningful activities' that would occupy clients' time, such as work-related strategies. Further rationales for approaches included the belief that independent living could lead on to loneliness and boredom. Thus, former rough sleepers may maintain 'chaotic lifestyles' even when in accommodation, in part due to their social networks on the streets. Consequently, hostels were encouraged to develop social enterprise schemes (such as cafes, furniture stores and gardening businesses) and opportunities for volunteering. In addition, day centres have increasingly worked in partnership with Jobcentre Plus to offer in-house employment-related support to clients (DCLG, 2008).

Discussion and conclusions

This article has tracked policy developments throughout the New Labour era, where they connect to homelessness and welfare-to-work strategies. Core themes, such as

social exclusion and the social contract, were outlined, and specific policy examples were provided in order to illustrate the development of conditional approaches in the support of marginalised groups. In particular, the article has highlighted connections between homelessness and employment policies and showed how these operated in practice, as part of broad efforts to empower and responsabilise clients to enable them to achieve independent living as 'active' citizens. In this analysis, conceptualisations about the transformative impacts of paid work became influential for homelessness provision. In particular, strategies to promote social inclusion were underpinned by recourse to conditional approaches. There were ambitions to turn homelessness services into first-step and transitional experiences, with practitioners required to support clients to 'move on' to independent and settled accommodation over shorter timeframes. A set of 'meaningful activities' were felt to possess transformative effects. Policy documents highlighted aims to 'support' clients by way of a range of therapeutic techniques, which stressed work-related measures. Potential outcomes associated with this type of support included rehabilitation towards independent living and the ability to achieve social conventions, such as paid work, in order to (re-)settle as empowered and responsible citizens.

We now consider how far policy developments under the Coalition Government reflect continuity or change regarding themes of 'social exclusion', 'responsibilisation', 'empowerment' and 'conditionality' identified in this article as distinctive to New Labour approaches. This section signposts the direction of the Coalition Government's policy responses to homelessness and shows where these overlap but also diverge from New Labour's. We argue that Coalition approaches represent both continuity *and* change of the policy themes under New Labour as identified in this article, including conceptualisations of linkages between homelessness and employment provision. We draw on several sources of evidence, including Government policy and consultation documents, and campaign responses, as well as a recent review of homelessness policy and practice over the last ten years by Jones and Pleace, which suggests that 'a number of strategic changes . . . look set to have important implications for services for single homeless people' (2010: 90).

The early months of the Coalition led to a range of legislative proposals and changes, which suggested that homelessness and employment strategies remained on the political agenda. Mass public spending cuts represent 'significant challenges for the homelessness sector' (Jones and Pleace, 2010: 90) and a number of homeless organisations and campaign groups have raised concerns about the impact of austerity measures. In particular, increased attention has been given to the Localism Bill, the removal of the 'ring fencing' of Supporting People funding, proposed changes to Housing Benefit and Local Housing Allowance and the increased age threshold for the Single Room Rate in Housing Benefit from twenty-five to thirty-five years. As discussed in this article, the resettlement agenda assumes transition from temporary accommodation to independent accommodation and it is proposed that this transition may be impeded as a result of significant cuts in the housing budget as outlined in the Comprehensive Spending Review. Furthermore, proposals for social housing reforms suggest that many new tenants will be offered fixed term tenancies (DCLG, 2010a) and are likely to pay increased rents as a result of proposed reforms (Jones and Pleace, 2010). However, others, such as the National Housing Federation (2010), have suggested that the Localism Bill will enhance affordable housing options.

In other developments, there seems to be continuity of policy responses developed under New Labour, albeit that these are subject to Coalition 'tweaks'. There has been a discursive shift away from the language of 'social exclusion' to what the new Coalition

Government terms, 'multiple disadvantage' (Cabinet Office, 2010, cited in Johnsen and Teixeira, 2010). However, the sustained focus on explanations and causes of multiple exclusion homelessness is evident in the Coalition's recently established Homelessness Working Group, a cross-departmental group of ministers. While the Coalition's adherence to previous targets to end rough sleeping by 2012 indicates a continued focus on rough sleeping, changes to the methodology of rough sleeper counts have been proposed. This includes an expansion of the definition of rough sleeping to include people about to 'bed down' for the night and guidance for local authorities to determine the appropriate timing of when counts take place (DCLG, 2010b).

The Coalition are developing their own conceptualisation of 'empowerment', and the potential benefits that this could have for local people and communities. The Localism Bill and 'Big Society' agenda suggest that empowerment can be achieved through decentralisation that would apparently shift power from the 'central' to the 'local'. This is considered counter to the regulatory state regime generated under New Labour. In the 'Big Society' context, 'empowerment' is linked to liberalism and greater responsibility. Within homelessness services this indicates a greater role for Third Sector services and may create greater flexibility and innovation in service provision (Jones and Pleace, 2010). Nonetheless, it may generate increased monitoring of voluntary and community sector agencies, and potential limits for their organisational control. It should not be assumed that voluntary sector organisations diverge from Government proposals. Homeless Link, for example, observes benefits from preparing clients for 'work readiness', and support member organisations' efforts to generate a 'transition from homelessness to a job and a home' (Homeless Link, 2010). Tied in with the idea of the Big Society is the Localism Bill which includes increased flexibility for local authorities to discharge their duties to homeless people by using private rented accommodation, 'without requiring the applicant's agreement' (DCLG, 2010a: 42). However, Jones and Pleace (2010) raise concerns that under the Localism agenda local authorities may choose to do very little to take action to address single homelessness.

Some reforms may represent a 'tougher' form of conditionality compared to that which took place under New Labour. We argue that specific strategies extend the previous Government's theme of participation in the paid labour market as a key means of social inclusion. Moreover, there appears to be a continuation of the linking of housing and employment as evidenced in further funding for the Places of Change Hostels Improvement Programme. Systems of sanctions and financial incentives can be observed. Key developments in relation to welfare provision, which are likely to impact people who are multiple excluded homeless, include changes to Local Housing Allowance (LHA), potential reductions in Housing Benefit and sanctions or withdrawal of benefits for non-compliance in welfare-to-work schemes. Whilst Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP) funding is set to be increased, it is argued that this does not provide security, as payments may be withdrawn at any time (National Housing Federation, 2010). The aims of Housing Benefit reforms seek to 'incentivise claimants to move off benefits entirely and into work' (House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, 2010: 6). However, as Flint warns, approaches 'focusing on financial measures, either as sanctions or incentives, negates the diverse range of motivations and challenges facing homeless individuals and marginalised households' (2009: 254).

Employment support through the new Work Programme is envisaged to continue and extend 'personalised' and 'flexible' support promoted under New Labour programmes. However, such approaches have been accused of facilitating the 'creaming' of clients

closest to the paid labour market (cf. Grover, 2009) and do not address multiple barriers to work faced by 'hard-to-help' groups, including many homeless people with complex needs. Campaign groups, such as Crisis and Shelter, have raised concerns that reforms may increase the number of people in poverty and at risk of homelessness.

This overview of the future direction of homelessness policy under the Coalition Government suggests that many of the key themes of New Labour policies identified in this article cross over in 'fresh' Government narratives. The effects of policy and welfare reforms on homelessness are yet unknown and, as such, the commentary reflects a set of more tentative observations. However, there is some compelling evidence of both change and continuity in responses to marginalised homeless groups.

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