

Tackling street homelessness in Scotland:
The evolution and impact of the Rough Sleepers Initiative

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Abstract

This paper presents a medium-long term analysis of the policy process in relation to tackling street homelessness in Scotland, through the Rough Sleepers Initiative. After setting the Scottish context in terms of governance and homelessness, the paper takes a chronological approach to policy review, drawing on empirical evaluative data and other documentary evidence. The paper then considers the overall effectiveness of the initiative in terms of its policy aims and in relation to the broader context of housing and welfare. The paper concludes by drawing some lessons which may have relevance beyond Scotland and the United Kingdom.

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Since the re-emergence of street homelessness in the United Kingdom (UK) at the end of the 1980s, successive UK governments have designed and implemented specific policies and strategies to tackle the problem. Within the UK, Scotland has always had the greatest degree of legal and political autonomy from the Westminster Parliament in London. Since the creation of the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh, in 1999, law and policy in relation to housing and homelessness has been more or less fully devolved to the new Scottish government, the Scottish Executive.

This paper is concerned with a specific policy initiative designed to address the problem labeled as “rough sleeping” in the UK. This refers to those who have absolutely no shelter and are sleeping out of doors or in cars or other such locations. The terms rooflessness or street homelessness are also used to describe this, most acute, aspect of homelessness. In the UK, the term homelessness on its own has a broader meaning, incorporating those living in emergency or temporary accommodation, but lacking a secure home. The terms rough sleeping and rough sleeper have become embedded in UK policy and practice discourse on street homelessness. While this author does not consider these terms appropriate for describing those who experience street homelessness, their use in relation to policy initiatives cannot be avoided.

The introduction, evaluation and review of the Rough Sleepers Initiative (RSI) in Scotland is documented, drawing on detailed empirical data from official evaluations and other published materials. The paper sets out the goals of the policy initiative, mechanisms for implementation and the range of assistance and services provided for homeless street people. From the available evidence it is possible to evaluate the initial effectiveness of the policy

initiative, together with the processes of review and fine-tuning, and to draw some broad conclusions on the medium-long term impact of the policy.

There is a large body of literature on homelessness in the UK and helpful reviews exist (Burrows et al., 1997; Fitzpatrick et al., 2000; Hutson & Clapham, 1999; Kennet & Marsh, 1999). There is a legal definition of homelessness in the UK (discussed below), but this paper draws on a common sense definition as summarized by Fitzpatrick et al. (2000). This definition includes both rooflessness and a range of temporary, insecure accommodation such as hostels and cheap bed and breakfast hotels.

Beyond defining circumstances of homelessness, it is important to recognize that homelessness is part of the process of gaining (or not gaining) access to suitable, affordable accommodation and any support services required to live comfortably in that accommodation. The notions of pathways into, through, and out of homelessness have become increasingly acknowledged in the UK literature (Anderson & Christian, 2003; Clapham 2003). Quantification of homelessness is closely associated with definition and has remained a challenge for the UK policy community. Official UK homelessness statistics essentially monitor the flow of households through a bureaucratic process of applying for assistance from a local housing authority (e.g., Wilcox, 2002, provides useful summary tables). For many years, these official statistics largely excluded people sleeping rough. More recently, efforts have been made to improve estimates of street homelessness as discussed in relation to the different time periods below.

The causes of homelessness have also been subject to intense debate in the UK, although there is an emerging consensus around the interaction between socio-structural causes (poverty, unemployment, the housing system) and more psychological explanations of individual agency

in terms of choices made within structural constraints (Anderson & Christian 2003; Clapham 2003). Key risk factors associated with homelessness and trigger factors precipitating episodes of street homelessness have been identified by Fitzpatrick et al. (2000). Family background, experience with social work intervention and criminal justice systems, and physical or mental illness, often linked with alcohol and drug use, are all well established as being closely associated with acute homelessness.

The UK also has a long tradition of government intervention in the housing system and in the development of policy on homelessness at the central government level. Hence, theories of policy analysis and models of the policy process (for example, Hogwood & Gunn, 1984; Parsons, 1995; Hill, 2005) have been applied to the analysis of homelessness interventions in the UK to a much greater extent than have psychological approaches. The policy process is mediated by political and ideological values of those in power, but, as this analysis will show, policy initiatives can survive changes in the political complexion of government. In the analysis below, four key periods for policy analysis are identified and reviewed in relation to the RSI and the changing political context and policy environment. Conclusions on the effectiveness of the RSI are then drawn, along with possible wider lessons for homelessness policy development beyond Scotland and the UK.

The 1980s: The Roots of the Re-Emergence of Street Homelessness

Following the election of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 1979, the 1980s was a decade of dramatic change in UK social policy. The Conservative administration implemented a program of welfare reform based on neo-liberal, free market principles and the rolling back of the welfare state, which had been built up since the end of World War II (Marsh & Rhodes, 1992). For housing policy, this meant privatization of the public housing stock through sales to

tenants; reform of the management of rented housing; and substantial cuts in public expenditure on both the fabric of the housing stock and direct housing subsidies to tenants (see Anderson & Sim, 2000; Malpass & Means, 1993; Malpass & Murie, 1999).

Legislation to protect certain households from homelessness had been introduced in the United Kingdom in 1977, prior to the Thatcher era. The law placed duties on local government housing authorities to assist certain households in the event of homelessness. An understanding of the operation of this key legislation, later consolidated in the Housing Acts of 1985 (England) and 1987 (Scotland) was crucial to any analysis of homelessness in the UK in this period.

According to this legislation, a person or household was homeless if:

they have no accommodation in England, Wales or Scotland, or have no accommodation which they are legally entitled to occupy. The accommodation must be reasonable and it must be reasonable for the household to continue to occupy the accommodation. A person or household is also homeless if they have accommodation but cannot secure entry to it; if occupation of the accommodation carries a threat of violence; or if the accommodation is of a mobile type and there is nowhere available to place and live in the accommodation (Anderson, 1994, p. 2, after Housing Act 1985, s58).

The legislation placed duties on local housing authorities to secure housing for households which met the following criteria: (a) were homeless according to the above definition, (b) contained a member in priority need, (c) had a local connection (residence, employment, family) with the local government area to which they applied, and (d) had not become homeless intentionally. Importantly, under criterion b, households deemed to be in priority need under this legislation included those containing: one or more dependent children, an expectant mother, or a vulnerable member (due to old age, physical or mental health, threat of

violence, or being young and at risk of financial or sexual exploitation). Essentially the legislation created a fundamental divide between priority and non-priority homeless households which pervaded subsequent policy, practice and analysis in relation to homelessness in the UK (Drake, 1989). In short, non-family households, not deemed vulnerable (mainly single people of working age) were only entitled to advice and assistance in the event of homelessness and for most of this period were effectively excluded from the homelessness safety net which would otherwise have given them access to the public housing sector (Anderson, 1994).

Statistics on the number of homeless households presenting to local authorities and the action taken under the legislation have been recorded by local governments and published by the central government since the beginning of this period. Based on those presenting to local authorities, the recorded levels of homelessness in England doubled during the 1980s, from just over 60,000 households to around 127,000 (Greve, 1991; Wilcox, 2002). More significantly for this paper, the decade also ended with the re-emergence of street homelessness in the UK on a scale not previously known in modern times (Anderson, 1993). This increase in rooflessness was, initially, most visible in London:

By 1990 it was claimed by voluntary agencies and accepted by the government that around 1,000 people were sleeping out in central London on any one night, but that there existed a floating population of 2,000-3,000 roofless people moving in and out of hostels and other types of temporary accommodation (Anderson, 1993, p. 22).

While no official counts of street homelessness were available at the end of the 1980s, the best evidence of the increase was its sheer visibility, which drew a great deal of media attention at the time. The crisis was a function not only of pressures in the housing system, but also of broader retrenchment of welfare, and most particularly, specific cuts in social security

benefits which affected those most at risk of street homelessness (Anderson, 1993). However, the division between priority and non-priority homeless households was crucial in explaining why street homelessness, in particular, was almost exclusively experienced by single people (Anderson, 1993, 1997; Drake, 1989; Watson, 1986). Drake (1989) described the distinction in the homelessness legislation between priority and non-priority groups as a “fundamental definitional parameter which was central to any discussion of homelessness” (p. 120). That distinction continues largely to the present day, although this paper will demonstrate how improved consideration has been given to single homeless people over the long term and how, in Scotland especially, the recognition of their legitimate housing needs has gradually become more central to policy and practice.

1990-1996: The Introduction of the Rough Sleepers Initiatives

The flow of households accepted by local authorities continued to increase and remained at a high level throughout the early-mid 1990s, for example reaching 149,000 households per year in England and nearly 20,000 households per year in Scotland (Wilcox, 2002). A prevalence measure of homelessness helps place these figures in perspective, relative to the general population. Around the same time, self-reporting in a nationally representative survey indicated that nearly 5% of the UK population reported having experienced homelessness at some point in their lives (Burrows, 1997). The 1991 census attempted to enumerate roofless people for the first time and recorded 2,703 people sleeping rough in England and Wales, although it was acknowledged that the methods employed were likely to have resulted in significant undercounting (OPCS, 1991).

Despite continued adherence to free market economic and social policies, the Conservative government accepted the need to intervene to alleviate acute homelessness in

central London. Pressure for action came from housing advocates (such as Shelter, the campaign for homeless people) and the business community, who equally found the level of street homelessness unacceptable, although perhaps for different reasons (Anderson, 1993). During this period, the Westminster Government also commissioned a major study of the nature of single homelessness in England, including the first systematic survey of people sleeping rough (Anderson, Kemp & Quilgars, 1993). This study did not quantify single homelessness or rooflessness, but rather sought to understand the characteristics of homeless people and the reasons why they became and remained homeless. The findings from this study became available to policy makers during implementation of the first RSI in London, along with initial evaluation of the London initiative (Randall & Brown, 1993).

Launched in 1990, the first Rough Sleepers Initiative (RSI) provided additional funding for a limited geographical area in central London where street homelessness was most evident. Not-for-profit organizations were charged with using the resources to provide additional accommodation and to manage the process of assisting people in moving from the street to some form of shelter. The 1990 RSI was envisaged as very much a short-term initiative to tackle what was thought to be a temporary crisis. However, successive reviews and evaluations resulted in the first RSI being extended to deal with an ongoing problem (Randall & Brown, 1993, 1995, 1996). It must be noted, however, that for six years, the RSI provided resources exclusively to deal with street homelessness in a relatively tight geographical area of central London, despite increasing evidence of rooflessness across the rest of the UK. As implementation and review of the RSI in London proceeded, advocacy organizations lobbied for similar resources to tackle street homelessness in other parts of the UK, including Scotland.

During 1990-1996, Scottish housing advocacy organizations consistently lobbied for the

extension of the RSI to Scotland, where, it was argued, similar problems of street homelessness could be readily identified (Shelter, 1996). During this period, homelessness in general was rising at least as rapidly in Scotland as in England (Wilcox, 2002). While the absolute number of homeless households is much higher in England, the total population is around ten times that of Scotland (National Statistics Online, 2002). In 1996, the recorded number of homeless households in England was 118,660, while in Scotland it was 17,200 (Wilcox, 2002). Hence the relative incidence of homelessness in Scotland is comparable to that of England, and at times more severe.

Towards the end of this period, an RSI for Scotland was eventually announced by the Conservative government, just prior to its demise in the 1997 general election. However, this would not be a straightforward replica of the Central London initiative, but was adapted as considered appropriate for the Scottish context. In practice, little was achieved in terms of implementation in Scotland prior to the 1997 general election after which the Conservative government was replaced by New Labour.

1997-1999: Political Change, but Policy Continuity for RSI

The election of a Labour government, led by Prime Minister Tony Blair, appeared to herald a new era in British social and economic policy. However, there would be no return to the left-wing social democracy to which the Labour Party had historically adhered. Rather, Blair and New Labour stood for a Third Way ideology between neo-liberalism and old-style social democracy based on limited state intervention in key policy areas and encouraging partnership between the state, the market, and the not-for-profit sector (Powell, 1999). In addition, a program of political devolution for Scotland and other parts of the UK was an early priority for the Blair government. However, during its initial phase of comprehensive policy and spending review,

New Labour adhered to public spending allocations set by the previous Conservative administration (Kemp, 1999).

The European discourse on social exclusion (Room, 1995) quickly became dominant within New Labour dialogue, with the inclusion of all citizens through opportunity and participation an ultimate aspiration of government. Joining up both the policy agenda and service delivery in practice became a fundamental component of welfare reform for New Labour. In England, reviews of street homelessness and neighborhood renewal were undertaken by the Social Exclusion Unit, set up within Westminster Government in 1997. While housing policy *per se* had not been a high priority in New Labour's election manifesto, the problems associated with social exclusion were seen to be located among those who were homeless or living on deteriorating public housing estates (Anderson, 2000).

During 1997-1999 the Scottish Office continued with implementation of the Scottish RSI under the newly elected Labour government. The stated aim of the RSI in Scotland was to assess the extent of rough sleeping and implement proposals to address those needs (Yanetta, Third, & Anderson, 1999). There was also a medium term aim that by 2003 there would be no need for anyone in Scotland to sleep rough. Mirroring the earlier approach of the Conservatives in England, there was the expectation that the high level of street homelessness was some kind of temporary crisis which could be resolved by a short-term, intensive initiative. Nevertheless, the policy goals were backed up with significant financial resources: Initially, 16 million pounds (about \$26 million) were allocated to the initiative in Scotland.

In key aspects, the Scottish RSI was quite distinct from its English counterpart. First of all, it was a national (Scotland-wide) initiative from the outset (Scottish Office Development Department, 1996, 1997). However, local authorities were required to bid competitively to the

Scottish Office for a share in the pool of available funding. Second, local government housing authorities were explicitly given the lead responsibility in co-ordinating bids for resources, where they had been largely excluded from the earlier initiative in England. Arguably, the process of resource allocation was more transparent than had been the case in England. A Ministerial Advisory Group was constituted to appraise the bids and make recommendations to the relevant government Minister, for the allocation of funding. This advisory group was comprised of representatives of central and local government, housing and support agencies, non-government organizations and the professional body for housing workers, the Chartered Institute of Housing. It met to consider bids and make recommendations to the Minister for funding allocations, which were largely accepted without amendment, and produced its own interim review of the RSI (Rough Sleepers Advisory Group, 1999).

The Scottish Office commissioned an early interim evaluation to run in tandem with the first year of implementation of the initiative, creating the opportunity to obtain early evaluative evidence that could inform later stages of implementation. Much of the remainder of this section considers the key findings from this evaluation. The evaluation sought to assess the development of local strategies for rough sleeping in Scotland, to assess individual projects and outcomes, to make recommendations on good practice for meeting the needs of rough sleepers, and to assess the effectiveness of the program overall. The evaluation used a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods including focus groups with RSI staff and case study visits to all funded projects; analysis of RSI client monitoring data from funded projects; and an interview survey of 100 clients using services funded through RSI Scotland. The evaluation focused on the period April 1998-March 1999. During this period an initial 11 million pounds (\$18 million) were allocated to 13 Scottish local authorities to provide accommodation and support services to

street homeless people, and, in some cases to conduct research and development work.

While local authorities coordinated bids for their area, each bid could comprise either a single main project or a series of linked or discrete projects to help those sleeping rough in the locality. The approach in each area depended on the previous experience of tackling rough sleeping and the extent to which existing services were built upon, as opposed to starting from scratch. In all, 38 projects were funded across 13 (of a possible 32) local government areas. More than half of the total funding went to the two large cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh, where street homelessness was deemed to be most acute. Local authorities and partner agencies had considerable freedom in deciding what type of service best suited their area.

Perhaps the most significant finding from the interim evaluation related to the sheer scale of rooflessness uncovered in Scotland (Table 1). The 25 projects working directly with roofless people saw some 3,619 clients across the year. To put this figure in perspective, in Glasgow City, the local authority had estimated around 50 rough sleepers through street counts, but over 1,000 individuals used the RSI services in the first year. These statistics reflect the significant difference between attempts to physically count homeless people on the street on one night, compared to monitoring use of services over a period of time. Nonetheless, the interim evaluation confirmed that street counts on any given night underestimate the true scale of rooflessness, and also revealed a significant rooflessness problem across all participating areas, not just in the main cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh.

Importantly, RSI services were found to be well-targeted to people who had been sleeping out and most clients had not previously been receiving help from other agencies (Table 2). Thus, RSI did fill a gap in service provision. Very high levels of client satisfaction with the services provided were recorded, although service users may have had relatively modest

expectations, given that most had previously not been receiving any help. Some 80% of clients interviewed felt that the RSI services they used would help them to secure accommodation, and most acknowledged that they would need some support to get by in that accommodation. In common with earlier surveys of single homeless people, the interim evaluation of the Scottish RSI revealed that service users commonly reported having problems with drugs or alcohol, and other physical and mental health problems. A significant proportion had experience with social work intervention (including residential care) and with the criminal justice/prison system. While the client group presented many challenges in terms of resettling into ordinary accommodation, the survey also revealed that most service users had managed in their own home in the past. This was especially the case for older age groups.

RSI project staff were generally positive about the initiative but were able to identify a number of barriers to achieving success in reducing rough sleeping (Yanetta, Third & Anderson, 1999). Resource allocation was concentrated on funding support workers, as opposed to “bricks and mortar” accommodation and staff often had to negotiate with social housing managers regarding client referrals. Housing management practices with respect to rent arrears or other breaches of tenancy could also result in RSI clients being excluded from available accommodation, a conflict that needed to be addressed in mainstream practice over the long term.

The interim evaluation concluded that the early impact of the RSI in Scotland was significant, particularly in terms of raising awareness of street homelessness and galvanizing the efforts of participating agencies. It should be noted, however, that a range of agencies funded by other means (e.g., charitable donations or local grants) were already in place to deliver some services, notably in Glasgow and Edinburgh. While networks developed to co-ordinate the work

across RSI funded projects, these did not necessarily embrace the work of these pre-existing organizations. Nevertheless, RSI represented a significant enhancement to service provision and appeared to be a catalyst for improved discussion and joint working between agencies. In terms of policy recommendations, the findings of the interim evaluation indicated that RSI needed to continue, at least in the short-medium term. Early implementation had highlighted a more severe problem than had been appreciated and had identified key gaps in service provision for roofless people. The evaluation recommended that all local government authorities should be required to assess the scale of rooflessness within their localities and to develop an appropriate range of accommodation services. Further, practices on rent arrears, leasing agreements, support and eviction needed to be examined, with a view to finding ways to accommodate clients with difficult tenancy histories and difficult behavior.

The interim evaluation also revealed that RSI had been largely focused on housing and funded through housing budgets. There remained a need for a more co-ordinated approach from the central government level through to front-line service delivery and for increased input and financial resources from social work, health and criminal justice services in acknowledgment of their responsibilities to this client group. For the long term, it was evident that policy and practice needed to move from intervention to prevention, if the initiative was to have an enduring impact. Moreover, explicit recognition of the legitimate housing and welfare needs of single homeless people should underpin the provision of adequate resources for housing and support as part of mainstream welfare provision. Such a change in the approach to tackling street homelessness would acknowledge the need to tackle the underlying structural causes of homelessness that the RSI could not effectively address. That is to say, the RSI was better at dealing with crisis intervention and offering support than alleviating poverty or, say, facilitating

re-engagement with the labor market.

Overall, during this short period of two years, significant progress was made with implementation of the Scottish RSI, combined with initial evaluation and review. During the same period, legislation was passed to facilitate more fully devolved government in Scotland, heralding yet another new phase in governance and policy development which was to result in an even more fundamental review of homelessness policy, beyond tackling rough sleeping.

2000-2005: Devolution, Further Evaluation of RSI and Wider Review

Following the first elections to the newly established Scottish Parliament, a coalition between New Labour and the Liberal Democrat party formed the first devolved Scottish Government in almost 300 years. Traditionally the Liberal Democrats had been the UK's third and more centrist political party. Arguably, however, realignments have led to the Liberal Democrats taking an increasingly left-of-center stance in comparison to New Labour's clearly centrist Third Way.

In this new political context, implementation of a revised, more sophisticated, RSI continued to provide accommodation and support services for street homeless people, drawing on the earlier experience and the findings of the interim evaluation. For example, the second stage of the Scottish RSI provided specific funding for housing advice workers in Scottish prisons to improve discharge protocols. Importantly, resources continued to flow into the initiative and total funds allocated amounted to more than 40 million pounds by October 2003 (Shelter, 2003), more than three times the first funding level provided in 1998-99. The Scottish RSI had continued to evolve but was scheduled to be officially terminated by the end of March 2003, with the expectation that the accommodation and services it had provided would continue as part of mainstream local housing and support service provision.

The Scottish Executive commissioned further research to monitor whether it was meeting its target of eradicating the need to sleep rough in Scotland (Laird, 2003). By 2001-2002, 28 local authorities were participating in RSI and monitoring data were obtained directly from local projects. Figures were recorded over a snapshot week (including the number of rough sleepers and the number of unfilled bed spaces in temporary accommodation). The count was undertaken twice yearly. The total number recorded as sleeping rough showed a marked decline over three waves, although it appeared to be leveling out in 2002 (Laird, 2003). Also in 2001-02, 80% of recorded rough sleepers were male, mostly 25-40 years old and 69% were recorded in the four largest local authorities, mainly in Edinburgh and Glasgow (Laird, 2003). There remained some evidence of long periods of rough sleeping, but this appeared to be decreasing. Challenges in meeting the target continued to arise from combinations of problems such as drugs and alcohol and more could still be done on joint working (Laird, 2003).

After the official end date for the initiative (March 2003), the Scottish Executive continued to fund services through local authorities, though no longer formally as RSI (Shelter, 2003). At the end of 2003, the Scottish Executive announced the latest available figures for street homelessness in Scotland as part of an official statement on the impact of the initiative (Scottish Executive, 2003). By October 2003, only 328 people were recorded as sleeping rough, compared to 500 in May 2001. The Scottish Communities Minister commented that the target of ending the need to sleep rough had only just been missed. Overall, the reduction in street homelessness was considered to be an exceptional achievement (Scottish Executive, 2003). In a separate statement, the achievements of the RSI were also commended by advocacy agencies and participating service providers (Shelter, 2003). While rough sleeping had not been eradicated, it had certainly been reduced and without the initiative, street homelessness in Scotland would be much higher.

While accepting the official statistics and the achievements of RSI, the agency statement (Shelter, 2003) was more cautious in its overall assessment. For example, the Scottish Executive was criticized for taking too simplistic an approach to crude numbers of rough sleepers compared to empty beds in hostels. Indeed, meeting needs is much more complex than a simple numbers equivalence. Moreover, the target of ending the need to sleep rough was also seen as too simplistic, though important in driving political commitment (Shelter, 2003). Viewed from the agency perspective, a key achievement was the greatly improved understanding of the complex nature of rough sleeping and the types of services required to meet client needs. A particular concern was that those still on the streets may be those in greatest need of assistance. Given the scale of resources devoted to the RSI Scotland since 1996, provider agencies were at pains to stress the need for continued investment to avoid any subsequent reversal of what had been achieved (Shelter, 2003). National and local government needed to ensure that the momentum built up was sustained and that resources continued to be directed to those vulnerable to street homelessness.

The RSI in Scotland did not continue in a policy vacuum. Indeed, an early priority for the Scottish Parliament was a comprehensive review of housing policy. As part of this process, a Homelessness Task Force (HTF) was set up in August 1999 to conduct a major review of homelessness legislation and practice (Homelessness Task Force, 2002a). An interim report was published in April 2000, in order that early recommendations could feed into the legislative process (Homelessness Task Force, 2000). The subsequent Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 placed new duties on local government to develop comprehensive local homelessness strategies, including addressing rough sleeping. Existing duties to provide assistance to homeless households were also extended to include the provision of temporary accommodation for those

not considered part of a priority need group. Previously, such households had no clear entitlement to help beyond general advice and assistance.

The final report was published by the Scottish Executive in February 2002 (HTF, 2002a). The HTF also commissioned a substantial program of research to inform its deliberations (HTF, 2002b). In principle, the Minister for Social Justice accepted all of its recommendations, which effectively represented a broad consensus across statutory and non-statutory agencies. The key recommendations were translated into policy through The Homelessness (Scotland) Act 2003, amending the earlier 1987 and 2001 Acts (Chartered Institute of Housing (Scotland), 2003). The Act extended the categories of priority groups and made provision for the gradual abolition of the priority/non-priority need group divide. It also introduced a duty to provide temporary accommodation and appropriate support for intentionally homeless households. Overall, the Act resulted in a further increase in eligibility for social housing for roofless people.

In England, during this period, the government also set a target to reduce the number of people sleeping rough by two thirds, or as near as possible to zero, by 2002. A specialist Rough Sleepers Unit (RSU) was to implement the recommendations and to develop a national policy on rough sleeping for England (Rough Sleepers Unit, 2001). Subsequently, an independent study confirmed that the RSU had achieved its target by November 2001 (Randall & Brown, 2002). However, it was concluded that there would be a continuing need for services, though possibly on a reduced scale.

On the whole, important progress continued to be made in reducing rough sleeping in both Scotland and England during this period. However, by 2001 the absolute number of recorded rough sleepers in Scotland (500) remained close to that of England (703), despite having only one tenth the population (Department for Work and Pensions, 2003, T15a).

Research evidence offers little by way of explicit explanation of the relatively high incidence of rooflessness in Scotland, compared to England. However, trends in homelessness in Scotland have tended to lag behind those in England (Wilcox, 2002), the RSI was launched much later in Scotland, and the overall economy of Scotland is generally poorer than that of England. Moreover, long-term, overall rates of homelessness have remained high or continued to increase (Wilcox, 2002), suggesting that the emphasis on reducing street homelessness was paralleled by an increase in other types of homelessness, such as inadequate temporary accommodation.

Some time after the official “termination” of the RSI in Scotland, the Scottish Executive published its final, retrospective evaluation (Fitzpatrick et al, 2005). One of the aims of the 2005 study (p. 9) was to consider to what extent the recommendations of the interim evaluation (Yanetta et al, 1999) had been taken on board. The final evaluation confirmed that RSI had produced tangible reductions in rough sleeping, but that new individuals still continued to experience street homelessness. Local housing authorities reported cumulative benefits resulting from the combination of RSI and broader policy initiatives such as the implementation of homelessness strategies, health and homelessness action plans, and a new program (Supporting People) for funding support services for vulnerable people, including rough sleepers. Continuing difficulties related to helping those with multiple needs and ongoing shortages of key services such as drug rehabilitation, as well as a shortage of suitable long term housing options for those still sleeping rough (Fitzpatrick et al, 2005).

Conclusion

Though subject to much review and revision, the Scottish RSI survived Conservative, Labour and Coalition (Labour/Liberal Democrat) governments. The question may be posed as to whether this longevity in policy implementation indicates the convergence of political ideologies

and the emergence of political consensus with respect to the homelessness problem? Or rather, does the evidence point to the conclusion that the resolution of street homelessness continues to elude political parties of all ideological persuasions?

In this final section, the analysis draws on all of the available evidence to assess the longer-term impact of the Scottish RSI. The critique has demonstrated both the significance and the limitations of this high profile policy initiative. From the evidence examined, it can be concluded that significant progress has been made in tackling street homelessness in Scotland, but that there remains a need for service provision over the long term. There were some important differences in the evolution of the RSI between Scotland and England. However, both produced similar strategies which included targets for reducing the number of people sleeping rough and some special initiatives, for example on supporting people leaving prison and the armed forces.

The process of policy analysis also reveals some questions and lessons on homelessness which are likely to have relevance beyond Scotland and the UK. For example, street homelessness presents an important policy case study on progress in collaborative working, as the need for joined up solutions has become increasingly evident. There is a broad consensus, certainly within British social policy, that acute homelessness is a multifaceted issue, not just a housing problem. This has led to an emphasis on holistic solutions and multi-agency working, with an increasing variety of practical responses. These ideas of collaborative, joined up working also seem to transcend political divisions and international boundaries (Anderson, 2003).

The complexity of the issues means that the provision of housing alone is unlikely to fully resolve homelessness in the long term. Housing providers do need to work with other service providers to ensure delivery of appropriate support services to help people get by in

transitional or long term accommodation. Most recently, the development of broader homelessness strategies can be seen in the UK and, for example in Australia (Anderson, 2003). Collaboration and strategic approaches may be necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for development of effective policy and practice. Eventual outcomes will always reflect broader issues relating to the overall welfare settlement in any country and the balance of priorities across different client groups. Equally, strategies are dependent on implementation—the most challenging element of the policy process for both service delivery and evaluation.

Another important issue emerging from the RSI is around consensus politics and the policy process. The constitution of Advisory Groups with many relevant stakeholders involved has been key to policy development in Scotland and other parts of the UK. However, we must also ask whether it then becomes more difficult for partnership agencies to express criticism or opposition, or to expose evident weaknesses in strategy or implementation. It remains difficult to systematically research this part of the policy process, but it is important to understand the ways in which individuals, at different tiers, in different organizations, with very different degrees of power, actually come together to agree on collaboration in practice.

Despite, or possibly related to, the complexity of the process, homelessness policy and strategy has also remained heavily “top down” in nature, with the agenda largely set by central governments and some key agencies, then filtering down to front-line service providers. While there is some evidence of improved empowerment and participation of homeless people in the process (Velasco, 2001) this remains a marginalized dimension of the policy jigsaw.

Looking at international comparisons, there may well be other policy transfer lessons from the experience of the RSI. The RSI has been accepted and implemented by parties representing different political ideologies and may indicate either some degree of consensus on

homelessness, or, the existence of a structural level of homelessness in advanced capitalist societies which will always necessitate some intervention. Despite differing structures for housing and welfare provision, the same types of people seem to be at risk in the advanced capitalist societies of Australasia, Europe and North America (Anderson, 2003). While structural forces relating to poverty and the housing and labor markets underpin homelessness across countries, street homelessness is also persistently associated with a range of individualized disrupted life circumstances, from family breakdown to severe abuse and dependency on alcohol and/or drugs. At the international level, there has been a fruitful debate on the concept of welfare state regimes following the work of Esping-Andersen (1990). Homelessness research has not yet been fully integrated into these debates although the Europe-wide work of Edgar et al (2002) does begin to take this agenda forward. Nevertheless, to date there have been few truly comparative empirical studies of homelessness and there remains a need for more longitudinal analysis both nationally and internationally (Anderson, 2003).

In a broader review of international research on homelessness, Anderson (2003) challenges the research and policy communities to deliver greater rigor in policy evaluation. However, researchers also face constraints in the policy process. For example, where government funds evaluation of its own policy initiatives, it will have significant control over the timing of the evaluation and the resources available, if not the actual content. Pleace and Quilgars (2003) have also issued a strong challenge to governments and researchers regarding the effectiveness of many UK policy evaluation studies. They argue that too few achieve even a two-year evaluation period or generate repeated, comparable evaluations. There have been a series of detailed evaluations of the English RSI over what is now a ten-year period (Randall & Brown, 1993, 1995, 1996, 2002). There has also been ongoing monitoring of the Scottish RSI

(Yanetta et al, 1999; Laird, 2003; Scottish Executive, 2003; Fitzpatrick et al, 2005) allowing comparisons between interim and final evaluations.

Sound long-term policy evaluation often suffers from a lack of sound planning for evaluation. For example, where policy leads analysis and funding restrictions apply there may also be data collection constraints. Once an initiative is operational, recording systems may have developed which do not match with the requirements of independent evaluation. In terms of timing, evaluations may be too early and too short to fully assess the impact of a particular initiative. However, the Scottish RSI is one example where a reasonable assessment can be made of the medium-long term impact of policy. Overall, the conclusion must be that there has been a degree of success but that there remain fundamental inequalities in the housing and welfare systems, which mean that rough sleeping has not been eliminated. Rigorous long-term policy analysis undoubtedly requires substantial resources. While this may raise a conflict with resources allocated for policy implementation and service provision, in the long run it may be money well spent if effective policy interventions are an outcome.

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Table 1: Key findings: National statistical monitoring

- 25 participating projects worked with 3,619 clients during 12 months
- Nearly a third of clients used services outside the main cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh
- More than half were aged 26-59 years, with 42% under 26 and just 4% over 60
- Key issues faced by clients included problems with drugs and/or alcohol; physical and mental health problems; previous experience of prison and social work intervention.
- Nearly all clients were sleeping rough or in similarly vulnerable housing circumstances when they first contacted services

Source: RSI Interim Evaluation (1999), $N = 3,619$

Table 2: Key findings: Client survey

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 85% had recently slept rough• More than half had not been getting help from any other services before• The majority previously had their own home (94% for those aged over 35 years)• More than a third had been banned from some hostels or services (more than half in Glasgow)• Two thirds had experience of social work care, armed forces or prison• 86% had been living in the same area for a year or more• 80% thought RSI services would help them get the accommodation they wanted• 80% thought they would need support in their preferred accommodation• 97% would recommend RSI services to other rough sleepers

Source: RSI Interim Evaluation (1999), $N = 100$

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