The Home study
The support priorities of multiply excluded homeless people and their compatibility with support agency agendas

A qualitative study undertaken by researchers at Nottingham Trent University and the University of Salford and as part of ESRC’s Multiple Exclusion Homelessness Programme.

Key findings

• Multiply excluded homeless people’s (MEHP) priorities are not fixed but evolve with changing circumstances and experiences. Very few want to remain homeless, but for many the priority of securing accommodation is superseded by meeting survival needs – safety, food and personal hygiene – and the demands of drug or alcohol dependency.

• Agencies that work with MEHP identify a range of disparate priorities. Agencies may either serve to resolve or re-enforce multiple exclusion homelessness according to their specific priority and the ways in which they operate.

• A tension between support and intervention agendas is apparent in the work of many agencies who work with multiply excluded homeless people.

• A significant number of MEHP view agencies as prioritising their own agendas above meeting the needs and concerns of MEHP.

• While many support agencies share the priorities of multiply excluded homeless people to an extent, most are constrained to varying degrees by other agendas. This is especially true of mainstream statutory services that do not specialise in the needs of this user group. The help given by these services is frequently fixed by statutory priorities, centrally driven targets or constraints on the use of resources. It is also true where agencies are equally driven by the interests of public protection, street enforcement or migration control. Policy and practice sustains multiple exclusion homelessness in a number of key circumstances, most significantly:
  o where MEHP are unable or unwilling to meet the conditions attached to accommodation or support services and are consequently excluded by agencies from provision due to a lack of engagement or irresponsible behaviour.
  o where people are deterred from using services for fear of intimidation, exposure to temptation, or subjection to some form of control or criminal investigation.
  o when individuals are deemed by accommodation providers to be ineligible for homelessness support due to a lack of ‘priority need’, ‘local connection’, or outstanding rent arrears.
  o where migrants face a specific form of exclusion from publicly funded accommodation and support because of their immigration status.

• MEHP consistently report that where agencies and their staff are not circumscribed by external agendas, the most effective help is offered. This is most often found in soup runs, day centres, outreach teams and key working in specialist hostels, where a personal commitment to homeless people can be exercised. Personalised help from support workers who go beyond their brief to provide commitment and friendship to people at times of great need was the most common feature of effective support identified by MEHP.

• Motives for seeking help are complex. Factors that influence the pursuit of accommodation can be divided between changing circumstances and altered priorities. Circumstances change, for instance, when institutional barriers are overcome, when people become aware of services or when they are contacted and encouraged by significant others, who may be outreach workers, friends or even complete strangers. Priorities are altered by negative experiences such as a health crisis, the death of a friend,
or the risks and discomforts of street life. Positive motives are also important, such as a regained sense of self-worth, or the desire for reconciliation with children or other family members.

- Men and women experience multiple exclusion homelessness differently, but not to the degree suggested in some previous research. Women without care of dependent children are as likely to encounter obstacles in securing help as multiply excluded homeless men.

This findings summary is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with 108 single, multiply excluded homeless people (MEHP) and 44 key informants, managers or frontline service providers working in the statutory and voluntary sector agencies which support, or routinely come into contact with, MEHP. Participants were recruited via purposive non random sampling. The fieldwork took place in London and Nottingham 2009-10.

**Background to the study**

Homelessness is increasingly recognised as one facet of a wider experience of social exclusion. The term multiple exclusion homelessness (MEH) has emerged as a shorthand term to describe homeless people who suffer deep social exclusion often due to a combination of ongoing issues in their lives and non-engagement with, or exclusion from, effective contact with support services. Single, multiply excluded homeless adults are the particular focus of this study. People experiencing multiple exclusion homelessness characteristically combine a current, or recent (i.e. within the last 12 months), experience of homelessness (broadly defined to include rough sleeping, living in emergency or insecure accommodation), with one or more indicators of deep social exclusion, for example, chronic ill health (mental or physical), problematic substance use (drugs or alcohol), long-term unemployment, or an institutional background (prison, armed forces or time spent in local authority care in childhood). They routinely live in poverty and regularly lack, supportive close or familial relationships.

MEHP have become the focus of policies that attempt to tackle the causes of their social exclusion. The Department for Communities and Local Government have shared in the funding for this research in recognition that questions still need to be answered after 20 years of homelessness policy initiatives, beginning with the Rough Sleepers Initiative (1990-98), the Rough Sleepers Unit (1998-2002) and the Supporting People programme from 2003 with its concern to support a wide range of vulnerable adults towards independent living. Rough sleeping was one of the first targets of New Labour’s Social Exclusion Unit (1998), and Adults Facing Chronic Exclusion was a later focus of the Social Exclusion Task Force (2006). The early success of the Rough Sleepers Unit in reducing rough sleeping by two thirds provoked a later concern about the failure to make further reductions, and the No-one left out (2008) initiative contained a commitment to abolish rough sleeping altogether by 2012. This begged research questions about the background, circumstances and support needs of the remaining rough sleeping population. Against this backdrop, this study explores the priorities, agendas and aspirations of MEHP alongside those of the varied statutory and voluntary sector agencies which routinely come into contact with them. The research aims to contribute to understandings about the causes of, and solutions to, multiple exclusion homelessness. By comparing the priorities and aspirations of homeless people with those of support agencies it considers the extent to which they have similar or contrasting agendas, and the role these may play in alleviating or sustaining social exclusion.
Method and sample

The findings presented are based on analysis of data generated in semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted with 108 multiply excluded homeless people (MEHP) and 44 key informants. The fieldwork took place in the London Boroughs of Southwark, Lambeth and Lewisham and the City of Nottingham. Over 85% of homeless participants had previous experience of rough sleeping. 74 were men 34 women. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and analysed.

The chart below highlights significant characteristics within the sample of homeless people and compares men and women. The prevalence of the background experiences and ongoing issues identified by homeless participants are well in excess of levels in the general population. Notably, there is limited variation by gender, but women were more likely to have been victimised and spent time in local authority care as a child. A comparison of the London and Nottingham respondents shows similar levels of multiple exclusion indicators among MEHP. Noteworthy differences within the sample by location were, age (median age London 42 years, Nottingham 32), and ethnicity (66% of the London sample was white compared to 89% in Nottingham). These differences are reflected in the broader homeless populations of the two locations.

![Characteristics of the MEH sample by gender (%)](chart)

The research utilised an abductive, user participatory approach. This involved conducting two separate, parallel sets of interviews with MEHP and key informants and involving a team of former homeless people as peer researchers in the project. Peer researchers were recruited with the help of two collaborating partner organisations, Framework Housing Association, Nottingham, and Thames Reach, London. The peer researchers took part in focus groups to design and refine questioning guides, took a lead role in conducting interviews with homeless people and participated in analysis workshops.

A question of priorities?
Multiply excluded homeless people’s (MEHP) priorities are not fixed but evolve with changing circumstances and experiences. Very few want to remain homeless. On becoming homeless, many initially prioritise street survival needs - safety, food, personal hygiene - above securing accommodation or seeking help with other problems. For significant numbers, meeting the demands of drug or alcohol dependency, initially, takes precedence.

Surviving day by day. Getting accommodation wasn’t on top of my list. Top of my list was getting my money for my fix, getting my food and getting warm and stuff... I was so out of my face. I was high 24/7. (L11)

Over time many MEHPs’ priorities change. Securing appropriate accommodation is a key first step in tackling MEH. It often becomes a priority, when individuals encounter a serious, sometimes life threatening crisis. More positively it is also linked to recovering a sense of self-worth or the possibility of renewing valued past relationships. Persistence and flexibility in approach by service providers was shown to be the best way to ensure that, as and when the time is right for each individual, suitable accommodation and support is taken up by homeless people.

The outreach team nurse people, they were the ones that finally said, ‘Come on, we’ll help you out. You’re in a mess. ’ I was in mess; I’d cut my arm open; I was like filthy; I was on drugs. I didn’t like it. (N4).

Around and around. The outcomes are sometimes it sticks. Sometimes it just works. If you get them to the right hostel at the right time and the right state of mind with the right worker in the hostel supporting them. (LKI 1 outreach manager)

‘Housing first’ initiatives offer a radical alternative to traditional linear ‘treatment first’ models of resettlement of homeless people with multiple support needs by in effect reversing conditionality: instead of making independent accommodation conditional upon dealing with support issues, it is argued that support needs cannot be met without first placing the individual in a secure tenancy in which tailored, open-ended, voluntary support is then offered. Pioneered in the USA, this approach is gaining provenance in the UK, and might be an appropriate response to the changing priorities that we found among some of our respondents.

Incompatible priorities: a tension between support and enforcement?

Key informants working in agencies that routinely interact with MEHP identify a diversity of priorities in their work. Although this is an obvious statement, it is an important one, as these varied priorities reflect the contrasting remits and policy agendas which establish the limits of an agency’s role and influence the ways in which it works with users. Some agencies are very much focused on helping homeless people with complex needs rebuild their lives; others have more specific responsibilities related to addressing particular problems (e.g. substance misuse, mental health issues). Certain agencies (e.g. NKI 7) see their primary role as protecting the general public, and other homeless people, from criminal or anti-social behaviour.

Getting people housed really...it’s so difficult working with somebody who is street sleeping- how can they address other issues. (NKI 12 worker street outreach team)

To communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ...the main priority. But with that also we want to help people to move on in their lives. We want to provide a place where people can access services... will enable them to make choices (LKI 8 manager faith based day centre)

We work with people to increase their independence to give them a sound start again. (LKI 7 manager, supported housing)
You have to focus on the next potential victim...if we can prevent this happening...those potential victims may not become victims...It’s offender management. (NKI 7 probation officer)

All key informants spoke of helping MEHP but many agencies are constrained to varying degrees by other agendas. This is especially true of mainstream statutory services that do not specialise in the needs of this user group. The help given by these services is frequently fixed by statutory priorities, centrally driven targets or constraints on the use of resources. For example, a manager at Jobcentre plus unsurprisingly prioritised ‘getting people jobs’ (NKI 18) and highlighted the requirement for users to be actively seeking work to retain rights to certain benefits. Similarly, a key informant in charge of emergency mental health services was clear that the priority was to ensure that people ‘don’t remain homeless if they’ve got mental health problems’ but also stated that whether or not someone was homeless was immaterial because, ‘we’re mental health’ (NKI 16). Services set up to provide for particular needs in the general population are often ill-equipped to help homeless people whose multiple support needs may compound one another and render them unable to take advantage of the help on offer.

Moreover, a tension between support and intervention agendas is apparent in the work of many agencies who work with MEHP. Specialist homelessness support agencies, such as hostels and day centres, have been expected to move beyond traditional support towards becoming ‘places of change’ in order to secure statutory funding for their services. Similar agendas are also apparent in agencies driven by the interests of public protection, street enforcement or migration control. Several key informants note that whereas in the past their focus was on meeting basic needs i.e. getting “people off the streets and into settled accommodation” (LKI 18 tenancy support worker) today, much more emphasis is placed on service providers intervening in MEHPs’ lives to challenge problematic behaviour.

A lot of homeless people, a lot of vulnerable people, will get involved in these street-like activities. We have a responsibility to engage with all of the agencies involved and challenge those behaviours. We are funded from a significant source, Supporting People, to prepare people for independent living. Unless you actually start dealing with some of those core problems those people cannot live independently or sustain that independence. (NKI 20 manager homelessness support organisation)

However, the need to challenge problematic behaviour may potentially result in some people ending up back on to the streets. Some homeless respondents with the most challenging behaviour were deemed too great a risk by providers of, for example, hostel or supported housing accommodation, because of their failure to meet conditions and expectations. People were evicted for breaking rules about drinking or taking drugs, bullying, violence or intimidation towards staff or other residents, failure to pay rent, failure to take part in agreed activities, damage or theft of property, and commencement of a custodial sentence. Eviction was normally for a limited period, but could be permanent or cumulative for offences that were deemed to render the person a risk to staff or residents. Other respondents also described being unable to sustain the exacting regimes of abstinence that frequently operated at drug rehabilitation hostels. The result of eviction was often once again a period of rough sleeping.

The first time I became homeless, I slept at someone’s house for a couple of nights, got into the (hostel) and then the (hostel) kicked me out because I was drunk and disorderly. I had a fight with someone. The second night I was there I had a fight with this guy. I chucked some boots at the wall and smashed a mirror. That was a bad mistake. They kicked me out of there and that’s when I was homeless again. (N4)

These boys know you need to have a beer to get the edge off things. This woman threw me and (name) out, banned us for life because we smelt of alcohol. How can you put
somebody into the cold and you are a Christian? I can’t work that out. They put you on the streets for five days and (name), wrapped up in cardboard, bad place. (L48)

However, we also encountered a countervailing tension potentially posed by a failure to address problematic behaviour. Whilst some homeless respondents reported being evicted for challenging behaviour, others reported abandoning services or were unwilling to use them for fear of intimidation or unwanted pressure to consume drink or drugs.

I didn’t really like going to those two (day centres) because there were like too many what I call idiots that caused fights and bullying and that because with my medical conditions. (N35)

They are not the sort I want to associate with. I don’t want to be in a room with an alcoholic. I want to keep away from those people. (L41)

The dilemmas that conditionality brings are perhaps most acutely visible in difficult decisions taken by providers to evict or exclude users from accommodation services. When such steps are taken as a last resort in response to intimidation or violent conduct, exclusion is perhaps inevitable and justifiable as services look to prioritise the protection of other users and staff.

He seriously injured another resident... I thought I’ve got to draw a line. I felt he was somebody I was going to ring another hostel and say he’s not working here you have a go. He’s got to make up his mind if he wants to be off the streets enough that he will toe the line a bit. (LKI 2 hostel manager)

In recent years, Homeless Link has developed good practice handbooks to guide hostel staff in handling and preventing evictions and voluntary abandonments. More generally the use of acceptable behaviour contracts and other similar approaches to service delivery is now embedded in many agencies’ rules and practices for ensuring user engagement. However, the use of such approaches needs to be regularly re-appraised to ensure that the most excluded are not deterred, and that those who are evicted are not thereby abandoned. Homeless respondents and key informants consistently reported that services that were able to offer flexible encouragement and support at the service user’s own pace were the most successful in helping homeless people with complex needs to overcome the formidable barriers they face.

If you impose loads of conditions on people then they are not going to engage with you. (LKI 13, manager homeless organisation)

The role of policy and practice in sustaining multiple exclusion homelessness

Policy and practice sustains multiple exclusion homelessness in a number of key circumstances, most significantly, when individuals are deemed by accommodation providers to be ineligible for homelessness support under the Housing Act (1996) because they lack ‘priority need’ or a ‘local connection’ or because they are deemed intentionally homeless. Thirty-five homeless participants reported declaring themselves homeless to a local authority. Of these, nine were accommodated immediately, in most cases because they were owed a duty under homelessness legislation. This normally involved a place in a hostel. The rest were rejected in the first instance because they were seen as not meeting eligibility criteria. The outcome of rejection in many cases was rough sleeping for anything up to six months, though repeated applications often yielded positive results sooner.

I left my sister’s place because of the (domestic violence) problems I had… I tried to explain to the person that I am homeless at that time, right now. But they didn’t really care... They said you are not pregnant, you don’t have any issues like mental issues so we can’t help you. (L35)
The City Council tried to tell me I had no local connection. I was born here but because I’d been away for more than five years, even though some of that was in jail and other things, I was back down here in the same situation as I was up there. (N41)

Local authorities are tasked with making difficult decisions in situations where demand often outstrips supply. Circumstances differ in each case but many MEHP reported their frustrations at not being able to secure accommodation under the prevailing regulations despite being homeless and multiply excluded. Many key informants also highlighted constantly facing problems due to “whole intentionally homeless thing and local connection” (NKI 17 supported housing manager), with offenders accruing arrears whilst in prison and problematic substance users who prioritised funding their habit being seen as particularly vulnerable to negative decisions that are likely to put them on the streets. Whatever the intention of policy, significant numbers of key informants believe that many MEHPs’ applications are being refused for a variety of reasons.

Local authorities are closing ranks. Their largesse is shrinking with their budgets. That is effectively what’s happening. They are employing statutes to limit the availability of housing to people outside their locality. (NKI 7 probation officer)

Additionally, where migrants are denied access to accommodation and support because of their immigration status, policy effectively promotes multiple exclusion. The difficulties of two groups (i.e. failed asylum seekers and Central and Eastern European (CEE) migrants) unable to access publicly funded welfare provision because of having ‘no recourse to public funds’, are evident. Failed asylum seekers’ rights to UKBA accommodation and support routinely end on receipt of a negative asylum decision. Considerable numbers remain in the UK and ‘disappear’. Lacking rights to work and welfare, they are reliant on charities and other migrants for meeting basic needs.

They refused my case... ‘We cannot help you financially or accommodation’, so they took everything from me... For a while I stayed with a friend on a couch, actually on the floor. (N55 failed asylum seeker)

Following the economic downturn, many CEE migrants who originally entered the UK to work are now unemployed and unable to claim income related benefits as they do not satisfy conditions laid out under the UK government’s transitional rules for mobile workers who are Accession State nationals¹. CEE workers are now a significant minority within the MEH populations of both Nottingham and London. High levels of alcohol abuse are prevalent within this group.

Because I don’t have benefits I cannot go to a hostel, this is the problem. (N12 CEE migrant)

I’m working, maybe [for] three weeks maybe after one month I’ve no money. I’m must sleep on the street... too much free time, I’m alcoholic. I must drink. When I’m working, no drink.” (L108 CEE migrant)

Charities and faith based drop-in day centres play a vital role in supporting those who are unable to access statutory provision due to immigration status, because they have been banned or evicted from elsewhere or deemed ineligible for statutory support because they fall outside the limitation of housing legislation.

¹ The transitional rules ended on 1st May 2011 for Accession 8 country nationals. It remains to be seen if homeless CEE nationals are now accessing accommodation and services or if support organisations have the capacity to meet this new demand.
Overcoming barriers: an effective helping hand

For approximately 25% of our homeless participants, an active search for support resulted in them successfully starting to address their multiple exclusion. However, although only a minority actively sought help, just over half our sample of homeless people reported receiving unsolicited help from support services which, in most cases, enabled them to address complex needs. A very wide range of agencies were mentioned. Personalised help from support workers who went beyond their brief to provide commitment and friendship to people at times of great need was the most common feature of effective support identified by MEHP. Importantly, support workers were able to negotiate their way round institutional barriers, or find alternatives for people where standard sources of help had became objects of fear. Such people could be found among outreach workers, day centre staff, hostel key workers, and mental health, drug and alcohol support workers; they could also be found among volunteers and even complete strangers.

Dedicated people to motivate you: There are certain staff that you can tell are just doing their job. The staff there (daycentre), you can tell they’re so dedicated, so patient with you. They’re funny, they laugh, we have jokes, we have events where we try to go ways for homeless people, they feed you, they try their hardest, that place, wow, I’ve never met people like them in my life. (L39)

Innovative programmes such as the London Rough Sleepers ‘205’ initiative and the Nottingham personalisation pilot further illustrate the value of more flexible approaches to overcoming barriers to tackling the MEH of the most entrenched rough sleepers.

With this particular [205] group we are able to be a bit more flexible and put people in accommodation like B&B or a hotel, wherever they would go to get in we would support... Our biggest success is, a guy who - this is where the flexibility comes in - someone who has been sleeping on the streets for about ten years and they have no recourse to public funds. (LKI 12 Street population coordinator)

One guy for example has been rough sleeping for about 6 years now, doesn’t engage with any services other than the churches... We’ve now got him into a B&B.... 4 months probably of regular intervention with me building a relationship with him to get him to go and visit the B&B. Then get him to stay for a couple of nights and then he left again and then he came back and left again. Now he’s been there about a month and a half probably two months full time which is a fantastic step for that individual....My focus has been purely with individuals. (NKI 22 Outreach worker for hard to engage users)

An evaluation of these initiatives lies beyond the remit of this research. However, data from key informants (and evidence elsewhere) supports the view that such schemes which allow for the relaxation of local connection rules etc., and the creative use of personalised budgets (on terms negotiated between individual rough sleepers and their personal support worker), can be highly effective ways of successfully reaching out to the most excluded individuals.

Recommendations

- The statutory rights of single homeless people should be extended. The adoption of a new clause to the Localism Bill, strengthening local authorities’ duties to provide advice and assistance to non-priority groups of homeless people under the Housing Act 1996 would be a positive step in the short term. In the longer term, the approach being adopted in Scotland under the Homelessness etc. (Scotland) Act 2003 and the eventual abolition of priority need groups should be implemented by the UK government.
• The means of accessing emergency hostel accommodation through local homelessness prevention gateways should be more widely disseminated among at risk groups.

• Models of good practice in the management of hostels and supported accommodation services, such as those advocated and developed by Homeless Link, should be more widely disseminated and adopted, in order to restrict evictions to the bare requirements of safety and legality, and to avoid leaving people to sleep rough as a result.

• Accommodation providers need to address the issues that make certain hostels and supported housing an intimidating and less attractive alternative to the streets for some MEHP.

• The government should give serious consideration to extending the use of flexible, personalised support packages for MEHP. Flexible alternatives to hostels need to be available. Initiatives that combine the support of a dedicated outreach worker and a ‘housing first’ approach appear to be successful in reaching out to long-term rough sleepers.

• Rights to access basic social welfare benefits and homelessness support services should be extended to prevent destitution among migrants who remain in the UK and are unable to return to their country of origin.

• Every effort should be made to limit the impact of public spending cuts on services that support single homeless people and assist them in addressing the causes of their multiple exclusion homelessness.

• The problem of individuals not being able to access accommodation and support due to a lack of local connection is strongly evidenced in the study. Although it runs counter to the Government’s preference to devolve power to local communities, neighbouring councils should give serious consideration to the possibility of adopting shared duties under Homelessness legislation. A Pan London approach may be most suitable for the capital and consortiums of neighbouring councils appropriate elsewhere.

The project was undertaken by Peter Dwyer, University of Salford, and Graham Bowpitt, Eva Sundin and Mark Weinstein from Nottingham Trent University.

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