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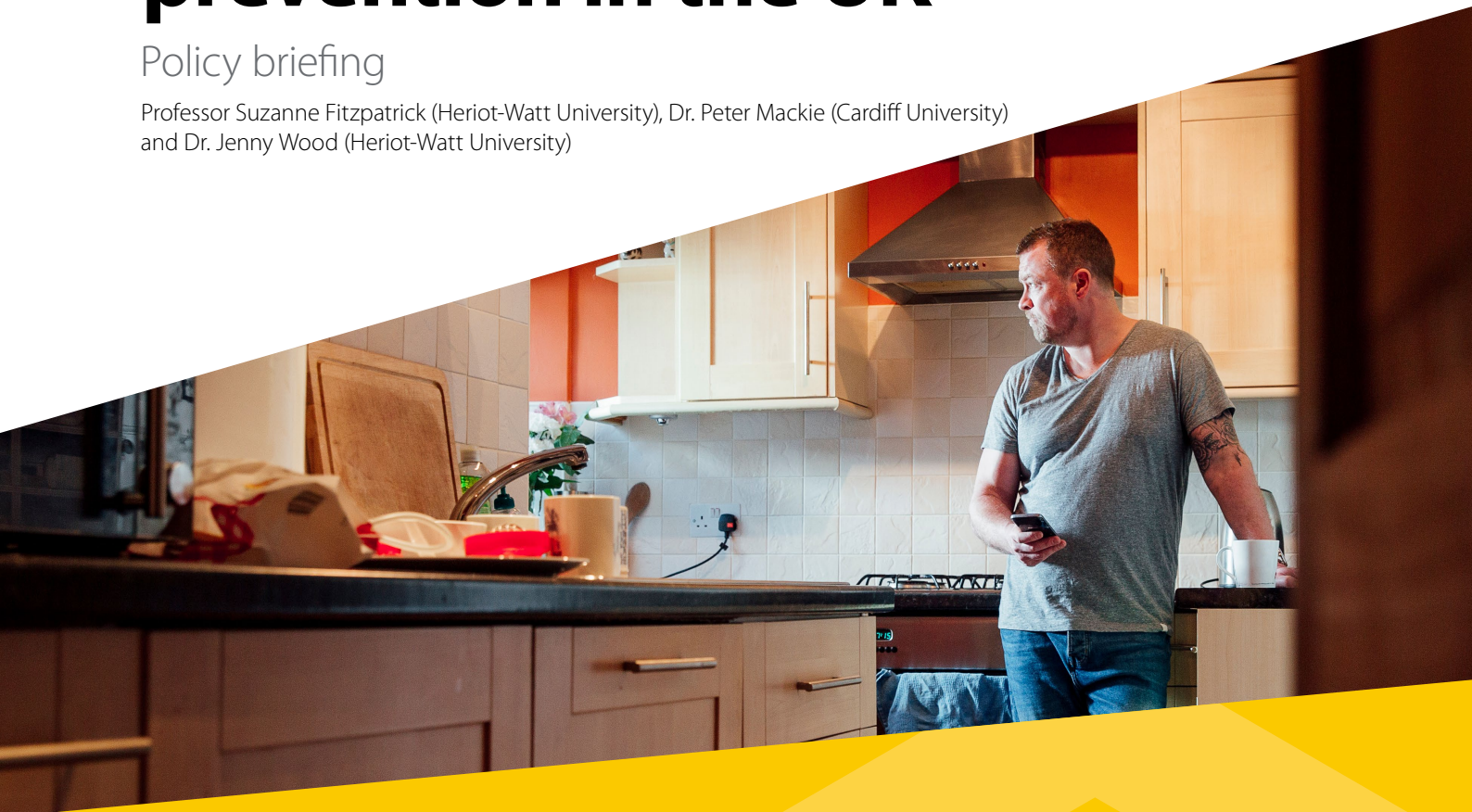
Homelessness prevention in the UK

Policy briefing

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Summary

There has been marked innovation and policy mobility[1] on homelessness prevention since devolution. Using a five-category prevention typology (Universal, Targeted, Crisis, Emergency, Recovery) reveals how early developments in Scotland focused on Emergency Prevention - ensuring that all homeless people have an enforceable right to temporary accommodation. However, most effort has recently been expended on Crisis Prevention, whereby people at risk of homelessness within 56 days are assisted to remain or secure alternative accommodation. Legislative developments in Crisis Prevention in Wales and England have proved effective, albeit there is sometimes a gap between intentions of the law and current practice. Progress on Targeted Prevention with high-risk groups, such as those leaving prison, has been slower to develop across the UK. General homelessness risks have increased as a result of welfare reform and housing market pressures, undermining Universal Prevention. Single people sleeping rough or at risk often remain poorly protected, but there are promising policy initiatives underway, especially on Recovery Prevention.

[1] See also Soaita, A.M (2018) Mapping the literature of 'policy transfer' and housing, CaCHE: Glasgow

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Background

Post devolution, there are divergent homelessness policies and laws across the UK. These "natural experiment" conditions enable investigation of the relative effectiveness of homelessness prevention across the four UK jurisdictions, with a view to mutual lesson learning. The comparative analysis presented here is informed by official homelessness statistics, national surveys of local authorities in Scotland, Wales and England (response rates of 91%, 86% and 51% respectively), and interviews with expert key informants from the statutory and voluntary sectors (n=35) across all four UK countries.

Homelessness prevention in the UK

> *"There has been a paradigm shift in homelessness policy-making in the developed world: we have entered an era of homelessness prevention."* [2]

This 'prevention turn' in homelessness policy has taken different forms, and has commenced at different points, in each of the UK countries.

There are greatest similarities between England and Wales, where the 'Housing Options' model of non-statutory homelessness prevention assistance was first established in the early 2000s. More recently, the Housing (Wales) Act 2014, and the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 in England, have introduced very similar homelessness prevention and relief duties in their respective jurisdictions. This means that English and Welsh local authorities must now offer material assistance to all eligible homeless households, and those who are threatened with homelessness within 56 days, regardless of whether they are in a 'priority need' category as a result of the presence of children or a vulnerable adult. An official evaluation of the effectiveness of the Welsh legislation was very positive[3], while evidence from the first six months of implementation of the English legislation is also promising.

Meantime in Scotland, the priority need criterion was abolished in 2012, meaning that all unintentionally homeless households are now entitled to settled housing. However, progress has been much slower on implementing preventative approaches in Scotland. A 'light touch' Housing Options model was introduced in 2010 and accompanied by regional hubs to support prevention service development[4]. However, Housing Options services were criticised heavily by the Scottish Housing Regulator for gatekeeping[5] and no prevention-focused legislation has yet been instigated, though there is now a formal Scottish Government commitment to do so[6].

Northern Ireland recently rolled out their 'Housing Solutions and Support' prevention framework, modelled on the Scottish Housing Options approach. This has been warmly received in the sector.

[2] Mackie, P.K. (2015) Homelessness Prevention and the Welsh Legal Duty: Lessons for International Policies, Housing Studies, 30(1): 40-59

[3] Ahmed, A., Wilding, M., Gibbons, A., Jones, K., Rogers., M., Madoc-Jones, I. (2018) Post-implementation evaluation of Part 2 of the Housing Act (Wales) 2014: Final Report, Welsh Government: Cardiff

[4] Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Bramley, G., Watts, B., Wood, J., Stephens, M. & Blenkinsopp, J. (2019) The homelessness monitor: Scotland 2019, Crisis: London

[5] Scottish Housing Regulator (2014) Housing Options in Scotland: A Thematic Inquiry, SHR: Edinburgh

[6] Scottish Government (2018) Ending Homelessness Together: High Level Action Plan, Scottish Government: Edinburgh

A prevention framework

There are a range of homelessness prevention typologies within the international literature. Most commonly used is the tripartite 'primary/ secondary/ tertiary' model inspired by public health approaches[7] and analogous with the 'upstream/ midstream / downstream' model used across wider public policy[8]. More recently a Canadian-inspired typology has gained traction in Wales[9]. However, we argue that the following five-category typology offers more discrete categories of prevention, and provides for a finer-grained assessment of current prevention efforts in the UK[10].

- **Universal prevention** - preventing or minimising homelessness risks across the population at large

- **Targeted prevention** – upstream prevention focussed on high risk groups, such as vulnerable young people, and risky transitions, such as leaving local authority care, prison or mental health in-patient treatment

- **Crisis prevention** – preventing homelessness likely to occur within 56 days, in line with legislation across Great Britain on 'threatened with homelessness'

- **Emergency prevention** – support for those at immediate risk of homelessness, especially sleeping rough

- **Recovery prevention** – prevention of repeat homelessness and rough sleeping

Universal prevention

> "The most important driver of homelessness in all its forms is <u>poverty</u>… Other drivers include, availability and affordability of accommodation, the extent to which prevention measures are used, and… demographics..." [11]

Cuts in housing allowances, coupled with affordable housing shortages and exclusionary allocation practices, means that England's recent record on universal homelessness prevention is dismal. Homelessness levels have risen sharply since 2010 in London and the South of England in particular[12]. This is largely the result of an extraordinary four-fold increase in the numbers made homeless following the termination of insecure private sector tenancies[13]. Lower housing pressures and welfare reform mitigation measures mean that the picture is more mixed in the other UK nations, albeit universal prevention requires considerable improvement across the UK.

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[7] Primary Prevention seeks to prevent new people from becoming homeless; Secondary Prevention is about quickly identifying people facing homelessness and working to end it as soon as possible; and Tertiary Prevention is targeted measures that address the housing and wellbeing needs of people that have already faced homelessness, to help them begin or sustain a path to stable housing.

[8] Coote, A. (2012) The Wisdom of Prevention: Long-term planning, upstream investment and early action to prevent harm, New Economics Foundation: London

[9] Schwan, K., French, D., Gaetz, S. ,Ward, A., Akerman, J., Redman, M. (2018) Preventing youth homelessness: An international review of evidence, WCPP: Cardiff.

[10] This typology was presented in a working document used by MHCLG to help inform the development of the Government's Rough Sleeping Strategy. It should not be seen as necessarily representing government policy.

[11] Bramley, G. (2017) Homelessness projections: Core homelessness in Great Britain, Crisis: London

[12] Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Bramley, G., Watts, B., Wood, J., Stephens, M. & Blenkinsopp, J. (2019) The homelessness monitor: England 2019, Crisis: London

[13] Ibid.

Targeted prevention

Despite a firm understanding that leaving a state institution too often results in homelessness[14], coupled with a growing policy interest in 'predictive analytics'[15] that enables the identification of 'at-risk' groups at a local level, early intervention efforts focused on vulnerable groups and risky transitions remains generally weak across the UK. There are exceptions: some improvements are apparent for care leavers in many parts of the UK, and new standards are being implemented for prison leavers in Scotland. Social landlords also often do a good job in minimizing evictions amongst high risk tenants. But public sector funding cuts and misdirected efforts can set back progress:

> *"Everything has been sort of stripped back to the statutory minimum, there is a lot less opportunity for informal early intervention."*
> *(Wales, Voluntary Sector)*

> *"…if you've a limited amount of money…is educating primary school children about [homelessness]…the best way to spend it?...would you not be better targeting it at youth clubs in deprived areas."*
> *(Northern Ireland, Voluntary Sector)*

The education, health and criminal justice sectors often come in contact with high risk groups at a much earlier point than housing and homelessness services[16]. However, key informants felt that the 'duty to refer' homeless people to local authorities imposed on public bodies in England under the 2017 Act did not go far enough in tying these wider services into preventative solutions. There was therefore great interest in the Scottish Government's plans to implement a more broad-ranging public sector prevention duty:

> *"There absolutely needs to be a duty to collaborate and to prevent and relieve [homelessness] because that then places the duty with health, with criminal justice system and I would widen it. I'd have it in education, I'd have it in a whole range of places. I'd give it to social landlords!"*
> *(England, Voluntary Sector)*

Crisis prevention

Crisis intervention is where most effort has been expended in recent years, and there have been significant strides forward in Wales and England as a result of the new statutory duties:

> *"…what's really been impressive has been the change of culture in local authorities. That is especially in the context of single people who previously would have been found not in priority need, and in many councils offered very little help."*
> *(England, Statutory Sector)*

> *"We're definitely doing better than we were five years ago. We're definitely providing more of a wraparound service and we've definitely got a lot more options available to support people."*
> *(Wales, Statutory Sector)*

Criticisms of this English and Welsh prevention legislation tended to focus on increased administrative burdens, the need for other public bodies to engage more effectively, and in Wales there are some concerns about lack of scrutiny over implementation.

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[14] Alma Economics (2018) Causes of homelessness and rough sleeping: Rapid Evidence Assessment, MHCLG/DWP: London

[15] Southwark Council (2018) Southwark Homelessness Strategy: 2018-2022

[16] Fitzpatrick, S, Bramley, G & Johnsen, S 2013, 'Pathways into multiple exclusion homelessness in seven UK cities', Urban Studies, 50(1): 148-168.

As noted above, there is now a policy commitment in Scotland to introduce stronger prevention legislation. This key informant expressed enthusiasm for doing the same in Northern Ireland:

> *"One of the things I'm really interested in…is…whether we should have some of the preventative duties or obligations because what I get from Welsh and English authorities is it's a cultural thinking that shifts around prevention and it's statutory and we tend to do things that you get measured on, rightly or wrongly… I like the idea of the 56 days and the kind of options there and the mandatory stuff." (Northern Ireland, Statutory Sector)*

Emergency prevention

The UK record on support for those at immediate risk of sleeping rough – mainly single people - is mixed and often poor. Consequently, rough sleeping has more than doubled in England since 2010, doubled in Wales since 2015, and remains a problem in Scotland and, to a much lesser extent, in Northern Ireland.

It is important to appreciate that there is no legal obligation to provide emergency accommodation to single people in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, even if they are at high risk of sleeping rough. This leaves them in a weaker (legal) position than in some other countries in Europe.

That said, in England especially, there have been programmes to tackle rough sleeping over many years, stretching back to the first Rough Sleepers Initiative in the early 1990s. Most recently, the No Second Night Out national roll-out has targeted help on getting new rough sleepers off the streets as quickly as possible, and 'Somewhere Safe to Stay' pilots are now being implemented under the current Rough Sleeping Strategy. These initiatives often demonstrate considerable success in reducing rough sleeping, only for the numbers to rise again when political priorities move on[17].

The position in Scotland is quite different, with virtually all homeless people having an enforceable right to temporary accommodation since 2001. However, some local authorities routinely fail to meet their duties in this regard[18].

Across the UK, there remains widespread (albeit highly variable) reliance on inappropriate forms of emergency accommodation for single homeless people in particular, including poor quality hostels and B&B accommodation. Longstanding evidence that many homeless people would rather sleep rough than stay in these intimidating congregate environments[19] has been a key prompt for the development of Housing First models of provision as discussed below.

Recovery prevention

The effectiveness of efforts to prevent the recurrence of homelessness, and especially of rough sleeping, has varied both within and between UK countries over time.

Currently, Wales and Northern Ireland are in a much better position than Scotland and, especially, England on this because of the greater protection given to their 'Supporting People' funding streams that finance housing-related support:

> *"…it is a success in homelessness policy in Northern Ireland that Supporting People still exists. That money hasn't been subsumed in the local government, and most importantly that it has been ringfenced so the money is still going into homelessness services." (Northern Ireland, Voluntary Sector)*

In England, in stark contrast, there has been a 78% real terms cut in Supporting People funding since 2010[20].

Much more positively, there are major Housing First initiatives now underway in all three GB countries, with relevant

[17] Mackie, P.K., Johnsen, S. and Wood, J. (2017) Ending Rough Sleeping: What Works? An International Evidence Review, Crisis: London
[18] Taylor, M. (2018) World-class housing laws risk being 'rendered useless' by repeated breaches. Online: The Herald.
[19] Jackson, R. (2018) Trapped on the Streets: Understanding rough sleeping in Wales, Shelter Cymru, Cardiff.
[20] Analysis conducted by Professor Glen Bramley based on CIPFA Financial and General Statistics Estimates, annual, using CPI as deflator.

projects established in Northern Ireland too. Housing First approaches involve rapidly rehousing homeless people with complex needs into ordinary housing, with the intensive 'wrap-around' support that they need to sustain this accommodation. This evidence-based model has proven far more effective than traditional 'transitional accommodation' approaches in robust evaluations conducted across a range of developed countries[21]. The current Housing First initiatives in Scotland and England are also subject to major evaluations. Access to mainstream mental health, substance misuse and social services is crucial to the success of Housing First. This reinforces the need for public sector-wide homelessness prevention duties in all four UK countries.

Conclusion

This paper compared the current state of play on homelessness prevention across the four UK countries and identified key opportunities for mutual lesson learning. It highlighted that significant progress has been made on crisis-focused prevention, with policy mobility between UK countries helping to facilitate this. Much work remains to be done on universal and targeted forms of prevention, and on improving the emergency housing and recovery support available to single homeless people and to those sleeping rough in particular. Improvements will require more meaningful engagement by a wide range of public sector bodies, and appropriate scrutiny of the implementation of relevant policy and law. It is vital to share lessons between local authorities and between nations in order to push forward progress in these areas.

Recommendations for homelessness policy

- The primary driver of homelessness is the inadequate protection afforded to low income households via the social security system, much diminished since 2010. The UK Government must improve the social security safety net, whilst devolved and local governments, and housing associations, also have a role in enabling access to more affordable and secure housing.
- Greater collaboration and investment in services are required to ensure nobody becomes homeless because of leaving a state institution such as prison or the care system.
- Scotland and Northern Ireland should adopt homelessness prevention legislation similar to that in England and Wales. Across the UK, wider-ranging public sector prevention duties are also required to target earlier multi-disciplinary assistance towards high risk groups.
- The use of inappropriate hostels and shelters as emergency and often long-term accommodation should end. Moves to embrace housing-led solutions are to be warmly welcomed, particularly the Housing First model for homeless people with complex needs.
- The engagement of health and social services is crucial to recovery prevention amongst vulnerable homeless people. There must also be investment in housing-related support.

[21] Mackie, P.K., Johnsen, S. and Wood, J. (2017) Ending Rough Sleeping: What Works? An International Evidence Review, Crisis: London