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Final findings: Homelessness

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Homeless people have been affected by the increased use of enforcement measures and associated penalties that aim to combat rough sleeping and problematic 'street culture' activities (such as begging and street drinking) in England in recent years. Throughout Great Britain they have also been affected by the increasing conditionality within the social security system and use of benefit sanctions. This briefing paper presents key findings from a longitudinal study which assessed the effectiveness and ethical legitimacy of such initiatives.

Key findings

- Enforcement measures do prompt some homeless people to discontinue harmful behaviours and/or engage with support, but they can also displace rough sleeping, begging and street drinking, cause those affected to disengage from support; and/or strengthen their resolve to continue participating in street culture.
- There is an increasing (but not unanimous) consensus amongst homelessness service providers in England that enforcement may be justified ethically if an individual's activities are harming themselves or others and they have refused offers of appropriate support. Homeless people endorse the use of enforcement in some circumstances, but resent measures that are implemented in an obviously discriminatory manner.
- As currently implemented, benefit sanctions do little to enhance homeless people's motivation to prepare for or seek work. They cause considerable distress and push some extremely vulnerable people out of the social security safety net altogether. Dealing with the 'fallout' from sanctions diverts support workers away from assisting with accommodation and other support needs.
- There is a consensus amongst support providers and homeless people that while the sentiments behind increased benefit conditionality may be defensible, current implementation practices are extremely problematic and difficult to justify ethically.
- Provision of meaningful support was pivotal in all the cases of positive behaviour change reported. Gains in relation to work preparation and acquisition were greatest when support was intensive and individually tailored. This was also true as regards reduced involvement in street culture activities, wherein flexible and 'sticky' support was especially beneficial.

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Introduction

Tackling street homelessness has been a policy priority in the UK for some time, with successive governments investing substantial resources in attempts to reduce its prevalence. In England, recent years have witnessed the increasing use of 'control' as well as 'care' in initiatives targeting rough sleepers and those involved in 'problematic street culture' such as begging and street drinking. These have not been pursued to the same extent in Scotland, where there has historically been less appetite to utilise highly interventionist or forceful approaches.

Enforcement measures adopted by English local authorities, in different combinations and with varying degrees of associated support, have included: arrest under the Vagrancy Act 1824; Anti-Social Behaviour Order (ASBO), Public Spaces Protection Order (PSPO), Criminal Behaviour Order (CBO), Injunction to Prevent Nuisance and Annoyance (IPNA), controlled drinking zones such as Designated Public Place Orders (DPPOs), Dispersal Orders, and designing out via 'defensive architecture'. These continue to be a source of considerable controversy, albeit that the 'hardest' measures which allow for fines or imprisonment affect only a very small minority of homeless people.

Homeless people throughout Great Britain have also been affected by the increasing conditionality of social security benefits and use of sanctions for those who fail to comply with specific behavioural requirements. Jobcentre advisers were granted discretionary powers in 2014, known as 'the easement', to temporarily exempt rough sleepers and homeless people living in supported accommodation from requirements that they be available for work, actively seek work or participate in the Work Programme.

Findings

Influence on behaviour

The policy stakeholders, frontline practitioners and homeless people interviewed confirmed that enforcement can prompt individuals to reduce or discontinue participation in harmful street culture activities and/or increase their engagement with support:

"I guess probably we've all worked with people who it has helped… there's been people who have been stopped from street drinking, from begging, and it has helped them in terms of their actual health and lifestyle that they go on to achieve."

(FRONTLINE PRACTITIONER, HOMELESSNESS CHARITY)

"If it wasn't for them [the police], I wouldn't be sitting here… I was going to drink myself to death. I didn't have a life. What's the point? I might as well just die happy… I didn't really want any help in that sense… If it hadn't been for those police saying… 'No you can't sleep here… there's a hostel down the road', I probably… would have been dead."

(HOMELESS MAN, ENGLAND, WAVE A)

That said, and echoing the findings of previous research, enforcement sometimes displaces such activities, causes those targeted to further disengage from support, and/or strengthens their resolve to continue participating in street culture:

"I was begging in those days so it was 'Get out of [borough] or we'll give you an ASBO… I just moved to the other side of the water. I didn't go far… I just moved area and when the same thing happened again just moved area."

(HOMELESS MAN, ENGLAND, WAVE A)

"It hasn't affected their drinking, but it makes them… less likely to trust us as workers. Because you know, they've been moved on from a different area, so it's harder for us to… engage with them."

(FRONTLINE PRACTITIONER, HOMELESSNESS CHARITY)

For some homeless interviewees, decisions to discontinue involvement in street culture activities and/or engage more constructively with offers of support were a direct result of the threat or experience of enforcement. For others such change was catalysed, at least in part, by personal crises such as deterioration in health or the feeling of having reached 'rock bottom':

"[I] just got to the point where I was sick of it. It's shite, it's shit life, horrible, it's a nightmare, looking back, yes, I don't know, I just wanted out of it, me, to be honest, all of it."

(HOMELESS MAN, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

Support had played a critical role in promoting positive behaviour change in all cases where this was evident in relation to street culture. In particular, interviewees highlighted the value of flexible and 'sticky' support that was tailored to individual needs and remained during periods of disengagement:

"No-one pushes me like [name of support worker] pushes me. I would be nowhere near where I am now, nowhere near [without her]… She was like 'What do you mean no? You will. I'll come with you'… If she gave up and just moved on then I would have given up… but she carried on with that support, so I carried on do you know what I mean? I've moved on."

(HOMELESS MAN, ENGLAND, WAVE B)

As has also previously been reported, benefit sanctions, in contrast, did little if anything to motivate homeless interviewees to prepare for or seek paid work. The majority had a strong desire to work, but were prevented by problems relating to their housing status, health, or distance from the labour market. Intrinsic motivation and/or the support received were considered to have been much more significant in facilitating progress than did the risk or experience of sanctions:

“ Much as I didn’t want my benefits stopped, because that’s inconvenient, that wasn’t the primary reason for job searching. I was job searching because I wanted a job.”

(HOMELESS MAN, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

“ I weren’t really bothered, because when I got sanctioned I’d just have to earn money anyway, in different ways, so that weren’t really – that didn’t really affect or encourage or, or owt like that anyway… It’s the support that’s helped me get there.”

(HOMELESS MAN, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

Furthermore, evidence drawn from across the three waves of interviews suggests that the current conditionality regime does little if anything to enhance homeless people’s prospects of gaining employment. Only a very small minority of homeless interviewees obtained paid work during the course of the study, and of these only a few maintained their job for longer than a few months; the others obtained short-term contracts only, were subsequently made redundant, and/or had to give it up because of recurrent health problems.

In fact, ‘protection’ from conditionality, brought about by transferral to a benefit with lower activation requirements (such as from Jobseeker’s Allowance to Employment and Support Allowance) enabled a number to devote more time to meaningfully prepare for or seek jobs that they had a realistic prospect of obtaining. Notably, the interviewees who made greatest progress were those in receipt of individually tailored and intensive support, the vast majority of which was provided outwith statutory Jobcentre or Work Programme provisions. Support to engage with volunteering opportunities was noted as being highly beneficial by a number of interviewees.

Sanctions caused considerable psychological and financial distress. They were a common trigger for extreme anxiety, depression, the onset or escalation of debt, relapses during addiction recovery, and/or repeat episodes of homelessness:

“ [The sanction] took me further down the depression route so much I got to, as I call them, naughty thoughts, suicidal thoughts… Each time I tried to understand what they wanted from me and they weren’t telling me clearly enough, and each time someone told me different. It was just like, ‘This is too stressful; I’d rather starve than deal with this’…”

(HOMELESS WOMAN, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

These impacts prompted some homeless interviewees to withdraw from the social security system altogether. Left destitute, these and a number of other sanctioned individuals resorted to begging or crime (typically theft or drug dealing) to meet their essential living needs:

“ I’ve begged… Yes, I’ve had to do that. I’ve even had to involve myself in shoplifting and things like that, stealing from shops. I’ve put my hand to a lot of things to survive day by day if I haven’t had the money, if they sanction me.”

(HOMELESS MAN, ENGLAND, WAVE C)

“ [I got by] illegally… Drug dealing. That’s what I did… That sanction… turned me to crime and making my money. And then after that I was making that much money I didn’t need their [benefit] money.”

(HOMELESS MAN, SCOTLAND, WAVE C)

Many interviewees were reluctant to appeal sanctions, given concern that doing so might further delay receipt of welfare payments. Levels of awareness regarding the possibility of applying for hardship payments were variable, and many of those who had been sanctioned had not received them.

Service providers note that significant amounts of staff time have been taken up in dealing with the 'fallout' from sanctions, and that this has impeded their ability to help homeless people make progress in accessing settled accommodation, recovering from addiction, or preparing for or seeking work.

Ethical legitimacy

There has been an increasing (but by no means unanimous) consensus amongst service providers in England that enforcement has a role to play in combating rough sleeping and street culture activities when these are harming the individuals involved and/or other people:

"I think people who are living on the streets and using drugs are posing major risks, and not just to themselves but to the public, so there has to be a response to that… We can't possibly go to a situation where we've got lots of vulnerable people living in cardboard cities; that's awful. Some people look back on them fondly, but I don't… They were exploitative, very miserable. Living in a cardboard box in Waterloo is not what I'd wish for anybody… So by way of wanting better for people, enforcement is part of that."

(SENIOR REPRESENTATIVE, HOMELESSNESS UMBRELLA ORGANISATION)

That said, it is widely agreed that 'harder' forms of enforcement with potentially severe penalties (such as ASBOs or CBOs) should only be used as a last resort, when sufficiently intensive and tailored supportive interventions have been tried extensively and exhausted. Evidence suggests that this does not always happen in practice, however:

"It's important to have… a case conference, a multi-professional meeting, a best-interest meeting… It hasn't always happened, and when it doesn't happen things don't go well. When it does happen, it can all be really effective and there can be a positive result at the end."

(FRONTLINE PRACTITIONER, HOMELESSNESS CHARITY)

"I think much of the intervention tends to be disjointed… So, as opposed to actually bringing all the services together and trying to work out a plan of stick and carrot, they don't often do that."

(FRONTLINE PRACTITIONER, HOMELESSNESS CHARITY)

Homeless interviewees generally supported the use of enforcement in certain circumstances, most notably when the individual concerned is behaving in a way that is clearly having a negative impact on other members of the street population or wider public:

"[Use of force is] fair enough if there are gangs of people, because you do get some really dirty horrible people who are peeing and crapping and God knows what everywhere and leaving litter and everything."

(HOMELESS MAN, ENGLAND, WAVE A)

"I have seen people [begging] that can be really intimidating, right up in people's faces, hands on them and won't leave them alone… and I feel they should be… told to stop what they're doing."

(HOMELESS MAN, SCOTLAND, WAVE A)

That said, homeless interviewees resented the use of measures that they perceived to be unjustifiably discriminatory, in that 'known' members of the street community and/or individuals who look 'out of place' are more likely to be targeted than the general public:

"I see… business people sitting with bottles of wine, bottles of champagne… now they never got asked to move. But the alcoholics that were sitting with bottles of Lambrini, bottles of cider, not shouting and that, they were asked to move. Now what's the difference really?… I believe everyone is equal. Sometimes in the police's eyes some are less than others, which I don't agree with. I don't agree with that at all."

(HOMELESS MAN, ENGLAND, WAVE A)

Service provider and homeless interviewees agreed almost universally that the sentiments underpinning increased benefit conditionality – particularly recognition of the negative aspects of welfare dependency and the advantages of paid work – but emphasised that current implementation practices are extremely problematic and difficult to justify ethically. Six particular issues undermining its ethical legitimacy were identified.

First, expectations regarding work preparation or search are very often unrealistic. Whilst a few interviewees described witnessing a 'softening' of expectations during the course of the study, there were widespread reports of Jobcentre advisers taking insufficient account of homeless people's circumstances when devising claimant commitments:

"If I had my own stable accommodation, it would be a hell of a lot easier to… find a job anyway, because I wouldn't have the stress of not knowing where I'm going to be sleeping… I was having to jump about, address to address, different nights. I said to them 'I'm not using this as an excuse, I'm just wanting you to understand my circumstances and maybe [give] a wee bit of leeway, a bit of help.'… I understand you have to push people to get to work but they've started to take it to extremes."

(HOMELESS MAN, SCOTLAND, WAVE A)

Second, many homeless people are sanctioned for failures of comprehension rather than deliberate non-compliance:

"At first when people sign on, they don't care, nothing's explained… so people sign themselves to these ridiculous contracts, and they need to have an advocate to basically go and change all this…"

(FRONTLINE PRACTITIONER, HOMELESSNESS CHARITY)

Third, many sanctions continue to be caused by administrative errors on the part of the DWP:

"They sent a letter to my contact address telling me about an appointment I had, but… it arrived on the day I was meant to have the appointment. So I didn't know."

(HOMELESS MAN, ENGLAND, WAVE A)

Fourth, the support offered to homeless people required to prepare for or seek work is often inadequate:

"I think they [Jobcentre and Work Programme staff] are absolutely not trained to work with chaotic people, with people with support needs. So they just don't have the knowledge and they don't know how to support [this group]. They just treat everybody the same."

(FRONTLINE PRACTITIONER, HOMELESSNESS CHARITY)

Fifth, the current conditionality regime is ineffective as regards the goal of increasing participation in paid work for this population:

"I have not seen any evidence that sanctions work and have the desired effect."

(SENIOR REPRESENTATIVE, VOLUNTARY SECTOR UMBRELLA ORGANISATION)

Finally, some of the unintended consequences have profoundly negative impacts on the welfare of this already very vulnerable group, by potentially worsening experiences of homelessness, triggering destitution, and/or diverting the attention of support agency staff away from the resolution of housing and other crises.

Conclusion

Evidence drawn from the study indicates that enforcement does sometimes catalyse a homeless person's desistance from problematic street culture activities and/or acceptance of support. Enforcement can, however, displace the issue, cause those affected to disengage from support, and/or strengthen their resolve to continue participating in street culture. There is increasing (but not unanimous) consensus amongst service provers and homeless people that use of enforcement is justified, as a last resort, when a homeless person's activities are obviously harming themselves and/or others.

Benefit sanctions do little to enhance homeless people's motivation to (re)enter the workforce. Support providers and homeless people alike generally agree that while the sentiments behind increased benefit conditionality are defensible, current implementation practices are extremely problematic and difficult to justify ethically. Sanctions cause considerable financial and psychological distress and push some extremely vulnerable people out of the social security safety net altogether. Furthermore, dealing with the 'fallout' from sanctions diverts support workers away from assisting homeless people with accommodation and other support needs.

Support is pivotal in fostering positive behaviour change in attempts to address rough sleeping and street culture; so too the promotion of homeless people's engagement with the labour market. Support is most effective when it is sufficiently intensive and individually tailored and, in cases involving individuals with complex needs especially, also flexible and 'sticky'. Examples of effective support do exist, but current provision often fails to meet the needs of homeless people.

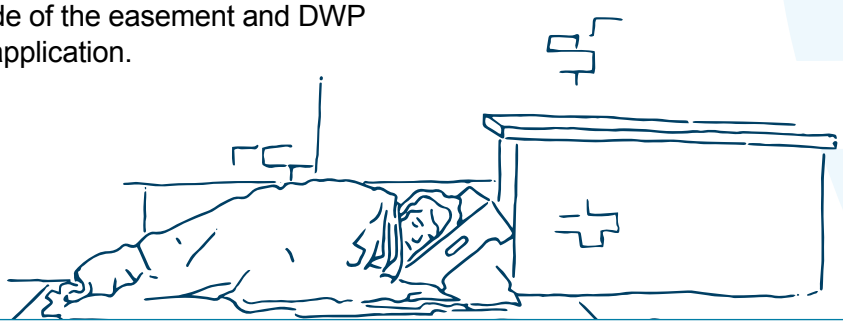
NOTE ON METHODS

This paper draws upon data from interviews with seven policy stakeholders (including representatives of national support or campaigning organisations), 27 participants across six focus groups with frontline practitioners (including street outreach, hostel and day centre support workers), and interviews with 55 people who had current or very recent experience of homelessness and who had been affected by one or more of the interventions under investigation in England and Scotland. Of the 55 homeless interviewees, 25 were re-interviewed approximately one year after the first interview, and 16 again approximately two years later.

Key policy recommendations

- 'Hard' forms of enforcement involving legal penalties should only be used to address rough sleeping and street culture as a last resort, when an individual's actions are harming themselves or others and offers of appropriately tailored, intensive and flexible support have been refused. Any enforcement action should be preceded and accompanied by intensive support provision. An individually tailored and stepped approach, involving warnings appropriate to each stage, should be employed in all cases.
- Expectations regarding work preparation or search need to take much greater account of homeless individuals' circumstances and vulnerabilities, including (as relevant) their: housing situation, physical health, mental health, literacy skills, language competency, computer proficiency, access to IT facilities, substance misuse, learning difficulties, and/or other recovery-related appointment commitments.
- DWP should provide greater clarity regarding the remit of and discretionary powers associated with 'the easement'. Eligibility criteria for easement entitlement should be expanded to include additional forms of homelessness (beyond rough sleeping and residence in supported accommodation) such as sofa surfing. Greater use should be made of the easement and DWP staff trained in its application.
- The support provided by Jobcentres and Work Programme providers to homeless people needs to be much more intensive, individually tailored, and flexibly implemented than it currently is. This should more fully recognise many homeless claimants' distance from the labour market, capitalise on existing motivation to work, and focus on overcoming any barriers faced on a case by case basis. Serious consideration should be given to the expansion of Individual Placement Support schemes to support this agenda.
- Heed should be taken of existing calls for reform of the sanctions system. In particular, a stepped approach with early warnings should be adopted and the severity of financial penalties reduced such that no-one is left destitute as a consequence of sanctioning. Care should be taken to ensure that homeless people and other vulnerable claimants fully understand their claimant commitment obligations and any consequences for failing to meet them.

This briefing was written by Professor Sarah Johnsen, Dr Beth Watts and Professor Suzanne Fitzpatrick, Heriot-Watt University.



Welfare Conditionality: Sanctions, Support and Behaviour Change is a major five-year programme of research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. The project is creating an international and interdisciplinary focal point for social science research on welfare conditionality and brings together teams of researchers working in six English and Scottish Universities.

Other briefings in this series and full list of references can be found at www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk/publications. Data from the study will be available from 2019 at www.timescapes.leeds.ac.uk.

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