No Local Connection Review Group

Research Report: Consultation on Local Connection Policies

4 September 2018

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OXFORD CITY COUNCIL

Introduction and background

1. This report has been provided as background evidence to the No Local Connection Review Group's ongoing research on local connection policies. This evidence may help to inform the oral evidence gathering sessions with guest speakers and the Review Group's final report. The review group is asked to:

    a) Note this report as background information for the review
    b) Consider whether it still wishes to visit another local authority, in light of the information received, and identify priority authorities if required.

2. The Scrutiny Officers has approached 29 local authorities to ask questions about their local connection policies. This report summarises the findings of this research, and the full unedited responses can be found at Appendix 1. This appendix is exempt under paragraph 2, Part 1, of schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 (information that may reveal the identity of an individual).

Methodology

3. The Scrutiny Officer contacted 29 Local Authorities (participants), initially with tailored emails about their local connection policies. This included a question on whether they would consider someone to have a local connection in circumstances where they had slept rough for six or more months. These findings are weighted towards London borough authorities, and other large metropolitan cities, so the data is not necessarily representative of English local authorities generally. Broadly speaking, London boroughs have a higher number of people sleeping rough than in more rural local authority areas, and greater infrastructure to operate a homeless pathway, supported by a concentration of third sector providers.

4. Importantly, London boroughs assume unitary responsibilities, meaning that they are the principal authority in that area responsible for homelessness. Conversely, homelessness funding arrangements in Oxford have previously been split between the City and County Council. This cooperative two tier arrangement adds a layer of complexity that is not prevalent in London.

5. Responses were received from 12 local authorities, including four phone conversations. In most circumstances, follow up emails / conversations were prompted, with fewer responses received in the second round. Each participant was made aware that this was for the purposes of the review group's work, but consent for wider publication was not sought. By asking for consent to publish, the Scrutiny Officer anticipates fewer responses would have been received, which would also likely be filtered. For that reason, this summary report does not identify any specific local authorities.

6. The responses of the local authorities varied significantly, with some authorities having a significant interest in the work of the review group, and others not responding. It is expected that some of the email addresses used may have been out of date, or the emails ignored due to high demand within the service.

Key Themes

7. This section of the report summarises the key themes of the data gathered from the participants in this research. The four themes relate to; policy discretion, reconnection, cross-boundary work and other comments.

Discretion is prioritised over a local connection, at the first point of contact

8. The majority of participants said they took a discretionary approach to service provision for people who are homeless or rough sleeping. Most agreed that whilst local connection criteria are a useful tool for reconnecting people and prioritising service resources, it was often left to the discretion of the outreach worker, and in some cases the pathway manager or multi-agency body, to decide what level of service should be offered. This includes whether someone should be entitled to overnight accommodation, access to support pathways, and move-on support. This however needed regulating, sometimes through contract managements (see paragraph 13).

9. Most participants were of the view that the strict application of a 'one size fits all' local connection policy was not appropriate, and did not account for the diversity of needs and vulnerabilities experienced by rough sleepers. Whilst some said they would offer a local connection to people who had been sleeping rough for more than six months, others took what they described as a more 'pragmatic' approach. Most suggested that each case must be considered on its own merits, with the health, safety and vulnerability of a rough sleeper being the priority.

10. Some explained that having strict local connection criteria could limit one's ability to act in supporting the most vulnerable. Many said that they did not have fixed (or were not willing to share) policy or guidance in this area, and instead tailored their support based on key variables including:

- Someone's physical and mental health
- Someone's level of dependency on drugs and/or alcohol
- Someone's risk of experiencing violence
- Whether someone's rough sleeping habits were entrenched (which does not necessarily relate to the amount of time sleeping rough, but also attitudes)
- The barriers posed to reconnecting someone to another area

11. One participant criticised the approach of offering a local connection to people who have slept rough for six months. They said that publishing detailed criteria on what will give someone a local connection, such as rough sleeping for six months, may lead some people to purposefully refusing other services for that period until a local connection is gained. Therefore, they suggested it was an unworkable as a policy. For example, the same participant explained that someone who has been sleeping rough for one year may be in less need than someone who has been for one day, on the basis of their health and vulnerability.

12. Another participant (that does not distinguish the level of services based on local connection) said they prioritised acceptance onto the pathway for those who presented a 'dual diagnosis (those with a severe health problem and problematic substance abuse). Overwhelmingly, health was considered the key vulnerability observed among rough sleepers, as opposed to risk of violence, for example.

13. Some authorities centralised their discretionary decision making powers into pathway managers, whilst others empowered outreach workers and third sector providers to make this decision. One authority with a significant street population highlighted that effective contract management of outreach services ensured only priority cases were referred for council support services, regardless of local connection. In this case, only a very small percentage of the 1000+ people each year who presented as homeless had a 'genuine' connection to the area.

14. Many participants recognised that judging whether someone should be entitled to overnight accommodation, for example, was a subjective process. One participant explained that a discretionary approach sometimes means overlooking an absence of local connection, and a formal protocol underwriting this would not be of benefit. Some described their approach as being 'local connection blind' at the first point of contact, with shelter being the first priority, followed by reconnection. This is the same as in Oxford. One area would only offer support to those who had registered at a local medical centre, which encouraged sign up.

15. Whilst most participants highlighted that discretion was key in defining one's entitlement to support, there was general consensus that local connection policies were a valuable way of resolving cross-boundary disputes, stopping abuse of the system, and prioritising need. None professed to have 'got it right', and some highlighted that despite their comparatively relaxed policy approach to other local authorities, there was still a significant number of vulnerable people on the streets, because there were not enough bed spaces, resources and services to support everyone.

16. Several of the participants explained that in their view, the relaxation of a local connection policy would only contribute to a minor inflow of rough sleepers from outside the local authority boundary, and any evidence to the contrary was called anecdotal by one participant. Participants were confident that the strength of local footfall, the night-time economy, begging opportunities and the quality of voluntary support services were a much bigger draw than what a council policy was. The European Observatory on Homelessness suggests that the perception that improved services will 'attract' people from afar to certain areas is an obstacle to progression.[1]

Reconnection will always be sought, except in exceptional circumstances

17. Whilst discretion was prioritised over whether someone had a local connection, the feedback from participants shows that the long term goal is almost always to reconnect people to an area where they have a local connection. Only in exceptional circumstances would a reconnection not be sought, such as for fear of reprimand by a violent drug dealer. For those with significant vulnerabilities,

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[1] European Observatory on Homelessness (2015). *Local Connection Rules and Access to Homelessness Services in Europe.* p.36

reconnection was generally sought after work had been done to stabilise that person's situation (i.e providing shelter and support).

18. Some pathway managers took advice from outreach workers on whether to reconnect someone, and others had dedicated reconnection officers responsible for linking people with services in their own area. Most took the approach of offering people shelter, and engaging them with reconnections further into the pathway. Reconnection work was highlighted as resource intensive, and participants indicated that local authorities had increased their focus on this in recent years.

19. Some authorities were asked what would happen in a situation where someone refused to reconnect. Most said that they would work with that person to understand why they refused to reconnect, and apply discretion on whether that was a valid reason. No policies were forthcoming on this issue. In one example, where someone refused a connection, the outreach team would monitor them at arm's length and judge whether their situation was deteriorating to the extent that they required full support.

Cross-boundary work is important

20. In line with the discretionary approach, some participants highlighted best practice through informal cross-boundary working. For example, two authorities spoke about negotiating reciprocal agreements for exchanging support for rough sleepers. Borough 'A' would take on a rough sleeper whose local connection lies with borough 'B,' but who has been rough sleeping in borough A and is reluctant to return to borough 'B'. In turn, borough 'B' would offer space in a hostel in their area to meet that needs of a rough sleeper in borough 'A.'

21. Examples of these reciprocal and informal arrangements were most common in mayoral areas, where the political and geographical arrangements supported close cross-border working. This is also supported through having unitary single tier authorities in London boroughs. Economies of scale and city-wide voluntary services were also benefits experienced within larger urban areas. Another example of an informal rule between authorities concerned allocating support based on which local authority performed the first assessment, regardless of local connection.

Other comments

22. Some other notable comments provided by the participants included:

- New funding from HM Government is allowing some authorities to progress new ideas and recruit more specialised staff. However, the future landscape remains unclear, and local connection policies may need to become stricter where the demand on services increases.

- None of the participants provided their local connection policies, or procedures for assessing sough sleepers. There was a clear nervousness among participants about providing this, with several suggesting that they did not have such a policy, and discretion was entrusted to the various staff supporting the pathway.

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- The challenge of affordable housing provision means there are very limited move on opportunities for those completing homeless pathways, which leads to saturation in support services. People can then become more entrenched because there is no throughput.

- People must be entitled to housing benefit in order that they can access support services, which generally disadvantages asylum seekers and European Economic Area jobseekers.

Conclusion

23. From the feedback provided by the 12 participants, the data showed that most authorities take account of local connection criteria in prioritising need, but discretionary exemptions were championed as a more practicable way forward. Officers have explained that this is the same approach taken in Oxford. Multiple and complex health issues, such as dual diagnosis, were highlighted as the key variable where discretion should be applied.

24. The challenge in administering this discretion seems to be whether every person working in the pathway, including outreach workers, commissioned providers and pathway managers, apply their discretion fairly and consistently. The subjective nature of discretion may benefit from having written principles, policies or guidance; which no participants were forthcoming with.

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Background Papers: None

Appendices	
Appendix 1:	EXEMPT – Responses Received from Local Authorities
Appendix 2:	Review Group Report of 19 July 2018
Appendix 3:	Housing First Savings Report: Liverpool

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