

Groundswell – Written evidence (UKH0060)

Groundswell works with people with experience of homelessness, offering opportunities to contribute to society and create solutions to homelessness. Participation is at our core because people have the right to be involved in decisions that affect their lives; this leads to better insight and better decisions. More specifically, Groundswell brings a nationwide network of people with lived experience of homelessness who have expertise in tackling homeless health inequality.

The National #HealthNow Network is led by Groundswell and delivered in partnership with multiple housing charities across the UK and Ireland, including Crisis, Shelter, St Mungo's and DePaul. The aim is to work towards an inclusive health system where everyone has access to the health care they need; ultimately moving people out of homelessness.

Introduction:

Members of the #HealthNow Lived Experience network recently participated in an online workshop to discuss their thoughts on the Built Environment call for evidence. The inquiry questions were presented to participants (and given context or further explanation where needed), and group members had the opportunity to respond based on their own experiences.

Workshop participants included volunteer peer researchers and health advocates with lived experience of homelessness (including rough sleeping, temporary/hostel accommodation, "sofa surfing" and other insecure living situations), and included participants with experience of mental health services and/or the criminal justice system.

Whilst it was felt amongst participants that their views would likely not be given priority (despite the fact they represent and speak from the perspectives of those with arguably the most pressing housing needs), it was also felt by the group that engaging with the Call for Evidence was worthwhile, and that the needs of the demographic they represent should be considered and acknowledged.

Responses to inquiry :

What social and demographic factors shape housing demand in the UK? What are the expected future trends in housing demand?

Whilst the group is not best placed to accurately predict wider societal trends and expectations, group participants believe that in the current political climate, and with policies planned which will further disadvantage people on low incomes such as the impending cut to the Universal Credit "uplift", many more people will be at increased risk of homelessness, and that there will also be much greater need and demand for affordable social housing.

What is the balance of demand for new housing between homes for private ownership, privately rented homes, and social housing? How does this affect the type and tenure required of new homes?

As the immediate likelihood of owning property feels far out of the reach of group participants, the choice for this group, where such choice exists, is between private rented and social housing. Some participants related their expectation, based on experience, they would be limited to the worst accommodations available, which would further exacerbate existing health or other problems.

Participant: *"The majority of us don't have guarantors, and some people don't have deposits. So, you've got to have landlords that'll just take anybody. And generally, those kinds of landlords have got the crappiest houses in the crappiest areas with the fewest amenities, and that's where you get stuck, where you want to be somewhere, sort of central, where you're near a doctors, where you're near a dentist, where you're near shops, where you're near people, you know."*

Participant: *"If you're on a low income or on benefits, you might even be working, but not in a particularly well-paid job, you're restricted to really the bottom end of the market, housing-wise."*

Participant: *"Some of the things we're thinking about in terms of access to services is that you may have been in one place with all of your services in place, but then get moved somewhere that's so far away from where that was that you didn't choose to move to. And then all the services like won't work with you anymore, because you're either in a different borough, or you're out of that catchment area, and that can have a really big impact on your health going forward."*

Participant: *"And I think that's an issue for people when they're moving on from homelessness or living in a hostel. The choices are very, very limited. So, the danger is you get housed, if you're lucky enough to get housed, in an area which isn't suitable for your needs at all, the services aren't there, and you might really struggle to actually pay your rent even. And then, of course, you are at risk of becoming homeless again. You know, the threat of eviction and being made homeless just from an economic perspective is quite high. And the figures do indicate that once one person has been homeless for a time, it could well easily happen again two or three times, which obviously retraumatise them."*

Participant: *"There is an absence, a shortage of reasonable quality, reasonable cost, housing for rent, never mind buying, and I guess that's what this report or various reports are looking at. There needs to be a lot more social affordable housing. It doesn't have to be a penthouse. No one's asking that. But you don't want a leaky roof. You want repairs to get done by the landlord quickly and so on. Housing and mental health are inextricably linked. And if you're in the wrong place, it's not going to do your mental health a lot of good if you're living in an area where, you know, your neighbours are not conducive to you leading a quiet or very peaceful life."*

Participant: "And I guess thinking about options as well, isn't it, so multiple different services yes, but it's not just about building a whole block over there of supported housing. I suppose it's having like options, isn't it, in different places?"

Participant: But because people think being homeless or being in temporary accommodation is the worst place you can be, so every option is a step up. So, you hear time and time again, people go "well it's better than being on the streets, isn't it?" But put a roof over your head, it's crap, it's in a crap area. There's nothing there. But it's better than being on the streets. and you can't sort of say, no, that's not right, because it is right, but...

Participant: But is it?

Participant: No. I was put in Middlesbrough years ago and I literally left there to go back on the streets because it was absolutely disgusting. It was cleaner out on the streets than it was in that rat-hole. I think there's a misconception that any roof is better than no roof, when the reality is that's not always true."

How should communities be engaged in the planning process?

Workshop participants felt traditionally excluded from the planning process, and some were of the belief that such processes usually amounted to lip-service, with little chance of their views making a difference.

Participant: "So I think there is rulings that say they must have consultation; they must give the public opportunity to speak. But there's no guidance on how it must be in layman's English. So, I think basically it's like the delusion of inclusion with consultations. They basically hit the legal requirement of "we're asking you" but they have absolutely no intention from the very beginning of listening to the public. But they passed their legal requirement because "we've sent out this survey", "we've sent out this enquiry". "We've got this form". That's another thing. A lot of applications now are online, which is digital exclusion, especially for homeless people. You say to imagine you say to people, homeless people, there's a form online you could go and fill in about housing. It's completely a waste of time. Well, the guidance has been passed because they provided a form."

Participant: "We represent a population that are marginalised and don't get access to engage in things like planning. But actually, in terms of the housing crisis, people experiencing homelessness are the ones that are most impacted."

Participant: "Probably also, you find that the people who are engaged first are probably people with housing and with the businesses and the ones that don't actually need it as much, and homeless people and people in temporary accommodation, they're going to be right in the bottom of the list of people to engage"

What can be done to overcome skills shortages?

There is a wealth of untapped skills, experience and potential among people with experience of homelessness, and many third sector organizations (including Groundswell and our #HealthNow partners Crisis and Shelter) have extremely successful lived experience employment initiatives which make a strong case for investment in people who may otherwise be typically overlooked by employers.

We know that with the right levels of support, investment and understanding, people with experience of homelessness are fully capable of contributing as committed and dedicated members of any workforce.

What are the main opportunities and areas of innovation for meeting the UK's housing demand?

One area for opportunity discussed by participants is that, in the wake of the Covid pandemic and subsequent shift towards home working, there is likely to be some potential for former commercial premises in town and city centres to be converted into residential properties.

***Participant:** "There might be scope for office blocks because Covid's promoted more remote working. A lot of companies are downsizing or not keeping such large offices. Some properties have been empty for a long while and there should possibly be a scheme where they could be converted into affordable housing."*

Participants discussed the idea that if provision was made for affordable properties in locations that are already well-served in terms of services and amenities, it would allow for people to live healthier lives, improve opportunities for social mobility and allow for some of the most marginalised and vulnerable people in our society to live more productive and fulfilling lives.

However, it was believed by some participants that the regulations contained loopholes which allow developers to avoid their obligations to provide affordable properties.

***Participant:** On the comment about the requirement to build a certain percentage of affordable housing: Apologies for those of you outside of London, because I don't know if this is a national ruling, but in London, there's a ruling that if permission is sought to build an office block and then that office block is converted into flats, there is no requirement, no requirement. So, they can convert an office block into flats and have it completely all private. And they're actually doing that. Where I live in Brixton, they're building a 20-story tower in a conservation area. Eight thousand people have signed against it. Lambeth Council have approved it. And it's currently sitting with the mayor of London. And it's basically been, through the Freedom of Information Act, the campaign group have found out that the plan is to, because everyone's like "why are you building an office block in a pandemic? Doesn't make any sense". Well, the Freedom of Information Act found out that the plan is to have it converted into expensive flats."*

***Participant:** The planning for affordable housing is usually includes something called Section 106. And Section 106 is an agreement to build a proportion of that to social rented standards. However, you can defer so you can take the money that you would have spent building that 20 percent of affordable housing and put it into a pot. And therefore, you no longer have to build affordable housing because that goes somewhere where the assumption is that that money will be spent on social housing or perhaps something for the community. So, it*

just gets deferred. It's a very good way of builders getting out of actually having to lease to affordable housing standards."

Closing statement

Whilst we recognize that this Call for Evidence may primarily attract stakeholders with an economic interest, we would urge the committee to keep in mind the needs of those who face the greatest consequences of the housing crisis. We believe that social housing is urgently needed, that homelessness and insecure accommodation are harmful to both the individual and to wider society, and that any efforts to address the UK's housing crisis should primarily focus on ensuring that everyone has access to a safe and secure home that is suitable for their needs.

We would be happy to engage further on these issues, and we welcome any meaningful engagement aimed at addressing the issues surrounding homelessness and inadequate accommodation in the UK.

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