



LEARNING BRIEF 2

Building Back Better

October 2020

SUMMARY

- Housing is a basic human right, and needs to be at the top of the political agenda. Covid-19 has reinforced the significance of housing as a pre-condition for health and wellbeing.
- Responses to Covid-19 have created new knowledge and practices that need to be embedded in policy and support arrangements - avoiding a return to 'business-as-usual'.
- The return to a 'new normal' must include stronger protection of rights, concerted effort to reduce the vulnerability of people in poverty and more responsive public services that recognise the complex problems of homelessness and insecure shelter.
- Partnership approaches are essential to engaging people and designing policy and support arrangements that can make a lasting difference to homelessness and insecure shelter.

1. INTRODUCTION

This second learning brief from the Comic Relief funded Homelessness and Insecure Shelter learning programme focuses on Building Back Better: exploiting the disruption of Covid-19 and capturing the lessons and experiences of the pandemic to improve the design and delivery of policy and services. This learning brief draws from the webinar discussion held on 15 July 2020 with Community of Practice (CoP) members working in the UK, Sub-Saharan Africa and India, and other supporting information.

This learning brief is aimed at members of the CoP and other partner organisations working to address homelessness and insecure shelter. This brief and other materials are available via the [CoP website](#).

Covid-19 continues to have a global effect on people and economies. While the World is becoming accustomed to coping with the pandemic, the continuing uncertainty and risk keep communities in crisis conditions. It is vital that, as we plan for the future after

Covid-19, we apply the lessons and embed the innovation generated during the worst of the pandemic, avoiding a return to 'business-as-usual'. This creates an opportunity for positive change – an opportunity that must not be missed!

2. LEARNING POINTS

The webinar provided an opportunity for the CoP to reflect on the experiences of Covid-19 and to share thoughts on issues that will drive future policy and service delivery. These focused on three key areas: shaping policy and legal rights to strengthen protections and create spaces for action; maintaining public awareness of the vulnerabilities of people experiencing homelessness; and the changed roles and new capacity of local organisations working on homelessness and insecure housing issues.

Shaping policy and legal rights

The pandemic has produced many examples of imaginative and collaborative actions to adapt public policy and provide emergency support to protect vulnerable people and limit the spread of the virus. These have included a halt on evictions, provision of safe shelters for street sleepers and the free distribution of food, soap, protective equipment and healthcare. Many of these interventions have been led by local groups

and have brought immediate and tangible benefits to people experiencing homelessness and insecure shelter. As part of building back better, it is vital that effective temporary arrangements are made permanent and embedded in legal rights and public policy.

Covid-19 has underlined the consequences of homelessness and insecure shelter for public health and provided clear evidence of the vulnerability of people without housing rights or legal protections. In Cape Town the lack of secure tenure for 'backyard' residents combined with sudden loss of income has led to high levels of evictions and a rapid rise in the number of land occupations, as people struggle to find space to live. In UK cities, the end of the 'everyone-in' campaign, where street sleepers were offered hotel and hostel accommodation, risks people returning to the streets without resolving individual and housing needs, despite evidence of the success of the campaign in containing the spread of the virus.

Getting people off the streets and into safe accommodation resulted in a Covid-19 infection rate of less than 4% in the UK, compared to 9% to 36% in the US.

UCL Collaborative Centre for Inclusion Health

The central challenge is to use the momentum of the crisis to address the flaws in housing markets and land tenure that have become more visible due to the pandemic. Resolving issues of supply and affordability, particularly for single and young people, is a primary challenge to reducing homelessness, in a context of rising unemployment. In Africa and India, accelerating the upgrading of informal settlements and making permanent the provision of shelters, supply of water and sanitation connections provided as temporary responses to the pandemic would be a major step forward. As a webinar participant commented “the government’s hands have been forced – we need to keep up the pressure.”

“Housing has become the frontline defense against the coronavirus. Home has rarely been more of a life or death situation”

UN Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate

Building back better relies on maturing political and service relationships deepened during the pandemic to encourage continued innovation and the evolution of provision to meet the needs of people experiencing homelessness and informal shelter. The disruption of the pandemic creates a unique opportunity to expand

integrated service delivery models, such as the Khulisa Streetscapes initiative in South Africa, and reshape welfare provision in ways that are tailored and contribute to stabilising individual income to remove a primary cause of homelessness, as recommended by the Child Poverty Action Group in the UK.

Learning Point 1



Sustain the operational relationships with local government strengthened by joint working during the pandemic and challenge a return to ‘business-as-usual’. Build on shared experience and collaboration to address homelessness and insecure shelter.

Maintaining public awareness

Issues of homelessness and insecure shelter have received high levels of attention in global media and in the responses of national governments during the pandemic. It will be important to maintain this high level of visibility to continue to press for a long-term solution to homelessness. Building back better must continue to frame issues to recognise individual need for a safe and stable home, as a social necessity as well as an ongoing response to protect against Covid-19.

Awareness and information campaigns have been adopted by groups, such as Shelter in the UK, to increase take up of housing advice during the crisis; using social media to share links through networks to connect to people with housing needs.

Learning Point 2



Increased use of social media has helped to increase the visibility of housing advice and improve public awareness of the effects of disasters on the lives of people experiencing homelessness and insecure shelter.

Through public campaigns and political engagement, changing the narrative is central to establishing a new outlook in public policy. As shown in the **DAG case study** (below), some organisations are moving the debate away from homelessness and informality as a social risk. They are encouraging a recognition of the need for all urban residents to have a home. This change in narrative focus creates spaces for discussion of rights and the potential for communities and government to work together to tackle homelessness.

Part of this is celebrating the bonds of mutual support present within communities. Grassroots responses to Covid-19 have shown not only the capacity of networks to

provide support to vulnerable people within communities, but that these networks are essential in tackling the public health crisis of Covid-19, as in the case of Ebola and SARS previously.

Among the CoP members, Mahila Housing Trust community leaders used WhatsApp to make contact and share information on Covid-19 prevention and support; using strong neighbourhood networks to co-ordinate responses to the pandemic in India.

Top down and inflexible solutions are unable to provide the capacity or level of access needed to provide the local knowledge, levels of support, information sharing or behaviour change without grassroots engagement.

Changed roles and new capacity

The pandemic has forced community-based organisations and public agencies in the housing sector to think and act differently during the crisis. The restrictions on traditional working practices, the need to engage and maintain contact with vulnerable clients and the new partnerships formed under emergency conditions all provide important lessons for the post-Covid agenda (**see Booth Centre case study, below**). Community-based groups across the CoP have taken on new roles to share information, to track the impact of Covid-19 and to distribute food, PPE and other forms

of support to groups that public agencies find hard to reach. To build back better it will be vital to develop and embed these new roles and new capacity in the design and delivery of services.

Mini Case Study

Booth Centre Manchester

Covid-19 has provided a major challenge to the Booth Centre, with the lockdown forcing closure of its community centre and a rapid reinvention of its client engagement and support activities. To comply with social distancing rules, advice services were run from the community centre's garden and activities were transferred on-line or through phone calls and messaging to ensure continuous contact with and availability for people affected by homelessness and struggling during the pandemic.

While the changes were driven by the circumstances of Covid-19, the Booth Centre plan to retain some of the adaptations into their post-Covid operations. More flexible working, using social media, telephones and messaging have created another dimension of engagement with clients that has improved accessibility to services. The Booth Centre will also continue the use of activity packs as a way to extend creative and meaningful activities beyond the Community Centre, with the associated benefits for mental health.

In managing the crisis response, the Booth Centre has implemented innovative changes that will continue after the pandemic ends. However, the experience has underlined the vital importance of ensuring that homelessness remains a high-profile issue to counter business-as-usual. The priority is to mainstream the quick response of 'everyone-in' to ensure adequate provision of single-room accommodation and associated support arrangements. The key is to address the conditions that reproduce homelessness in the lack of quality employment and affordable housing in Manchester.

An important aspect has been the strengthening of partnerships across community-based organisations as a basis for collective action. This has been used to challenge national policy (**see DAG case study**) and to improve the co-ordination of interventions for clients with complex needs. Greater collective action that brings together experience, capacity and new perspectives will be important for the post-Covid environment.

Mini Case Study

Development Action Group

An initial response of Government in South Africa to the risks of Covid-19 for urban informal settlements and backyard dwellers, was to 'de-densify': relocating people to

temporary camps as a way to reduce the risks of infection in crowded urban areas. This approach was actively challenged by DAG in association with other civil society organisations in South Africa as ineffective, as the movement of large numbers of people during the pandemic posed a significant risk and the initiative would have only impacted a few thousand households (compared to the need of millions). It also avoided dealing with the underlying need to accelerate settlement upgrading and improve legal protections available to tenants facing eviction due to loss of employment.

As part of lobbying government, DAG in association with a network of civil society groups worked collaboratively with the National Department of Human Settlements to devise and implement a response to Covid-19 in informal settlements. The framework agreement sought to use local knowledge and capacity to identify risks and mobilise communities to address immediate needs. This contributed to stem the transmission of the virus and co-ordinate the provision of food, installation of sanitation measures and distribution of PPE. This was intended to support a longer-term partnership to address upgrading and rights issues.

Establishing a firm platform for dialogue and the co-design of policies to address urban housing needs is vital for building back better. Covid-19 has clearly shown the

added value of collaborative working, but also the need to get fundamental policies and legal rights in place to tackle homelessness and insecure shelter.

Learning Point 3



With public funds expected to be scarce after the pandemic, it will be vital to fully utilise the capacity of community-based organisations and cross-sector partnerships to address homelessness and insecure shelter.

Working towards more effective integration of services, with greater availability of housing at the centre, is essential to reducing homelessness. Improved design and procurement of services that align health, employment and housing services is necessary to address the complex challenges of homelessness and it is vital to prevent a return to siloed provision. Working with and through community-based groups could create more effective pathways to addressing homelessness and insecure housing.

Learning Point 4



Sharing learning across community-based organisations on how to sustain partnership activity beyond Covid-19 will be vital to realising the full benefits of innovation generated during the pandemic.

3. IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Experience of the pandemic offers lessons for policy makers and practitioners to help address the systemic barriers to tackling homelessness and insecure shelter in legal frameworks and in public services and improvements to client engagement and service delivery. Building back better entails challenging policy and practice to incorporate the new ideas and approaches developed during the pandemic.

For policy – mainstream the effective responses that worked to protect homeless people during the pandemic. Greater availability of shelter and accommodation, ensuring services are tailored to individual needs, continued provision of sanitation facilities and an acceleration of affordable housing and settlement upgrading to reduce future public health risks.

For practitioners – to continue to innovate in the use of digital technology in the engagement and support of clients. The pandemic has provided a unique opportunity to expand the reach of groups and experiment with the management and organisation of service delivery that should continue post-Covid.



Photo by Patch Dolan/Comic Relief

For partnership working – to improve local commissioning and procurement of services to make the best use of public and community resources and capacity. With a long economic recovery from Covid-19 expected, there will be increasing pressure on housing and support services as more individuals and families become at risk of homelessness.

For all – to maintain the profile and prominence of homelessness and insecure shelter on the public and political agenda.

While Covid-19 has clearly demonstrated the importance of home and the consequences of a lack of adequate shelter, public sector action is returning to a 'business-as-usual'

setting. The pandemic has created a unique space for change that needs to be seized in order to build back better.



Photo by Jessica Wiseman/Comic Relief

4. FURTHER INFORMATION

Additional information on the impact and the responses to Covid-19 can be found on the [Community of Practice website](https://www.housingandshelter.org).