



Models of social enterprise in the homelessness field

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Abstract

Purpose – There is much current policy and practitioner enthusiasm for using social enterprise to tackle the problems faced by homeless people. However, there is no evidence base to support (or negate) this policy focus. The purpose of this paper is to identify the different ways in which social enterprise responds to the needs of homeless people, and some of the challenges faced by social enterprises in the homelessness field.

Design/methodology/approach – Desk-based research of the grey literature identified different models of social enterprise in the homelessness field. A review of the two sets of literature on homelessness and social enterprise was conducted to identify the implications of these models for homeless people.

Findings – Six models of social enterprise in the homelessness field are identified. Social enterprise involves balancing social and economic objectives. As third sector organisations become more business focused, there is a risk that those homeless people with the most complex or acute needs are abandoned as they are not profitable to work with.

Originality/value – This paper is the first to bring together two sets of literature in order to identify how social enterprise responds to homelessness. The paper is of use to policy makers aiming to develop targeted approaches to tackling homelessness. It is also of use to organisations in the homelessness field looking to develop social enterprise models.

Keywords Non-profit organized, Homelessness, United Kingdom

Paper type General review

1. Introduction

Since 2003, there has been an increasing policy focus on social enterprise as a potential solution to the problems faced by homeless people, particularly through the provision of employment training as a precursor to entering the mainstream labour market (ODPM, 2003a, 2005; CLG, 2006, 2007, 2008). This reflects what Levitas (2005) refers to as a shift in New Labour policy from seeing social exclusion as a material consequence of inequality, and towards a view of exclusion as an individual problem to be rectified by improving access to the labour market. However, there is little evidence to support or (negate) the policy assumption that social enterprise can respond to the needs of homeless people in this way. Instead, there are two distinct sets of literature: homelessness and social

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enterprise, and the areas of overlap are minimal. This paper bridges the gap by bringing together these two sets of literature to help answer the question: in what ways does social enterprise respond to the needs of homeless people? For the purposes of this paper, social enterprise is broadly defined as an activity – trading for a social purpose – that is usually undertaken by organisations within the third sector.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 draws upon the homelessness literature to identify the problems which social enterprise might respond to. Section 3 traces the history of social enterprise in the homelessness field. In the process, six models of social enterprise are identified. It is suggested that isomorphic pressures are leading to these different models merging together into a hybrid form. Section 4 investigates the wider social enterprise research literature to explore potential challenges faced by social enterprises in the homelessness field. Section 5 identifies gaps in the research literature requiring further investigation. The final section outlines some of the implications for policy and practice.

2. Homelessness: what, who, and why?

Homelessness is a variable and problematic concept incorporating a continuum of possible housing circumstances (Table I) (Cloke *et al.*, 2000; Fitzpatrick and Stephens, 2007).

Aggregate levels of homelessness are associated with structural factors such as insufficient housing supply, levels of unemployment, and the social safety net provided by different welfare regimes (Stephens and Fitzpatrick, 2007; Pleace and Quilgars, 2003; Anderson, 2003). Addressing these structural forces would be expected to bring about a decline in the overall numbers of homeless people (Stephens and Fitzpatrick, 2007). However, local authorities only have a duty to provide accommodation for those homeless people deemed in priority need, primarily those with dependents (Cloke *et al.*, 2001). Prevention strategies aiming to help people before they become homeless (advice and mediation services for those at risk of homelessness) have corresponded with a dramatic fall in levels of statutory homeless applications since their introduction in England in 2003 (Stephens and Fitzpatrick, 2007). However, Pawson and Davidson (2006) caution that some of this fall may be attributable to homeless people being “discouraged” from making an application under the 2002 Homeless Persons Act, and instead being diverted into unsuitable (private rental sector) schemes as part of the prevention strategy.

Those homeless people not deemed in priority need have been labeled the “single homeless” (Pleace, 1999). It is probable that for most of these people homelessness is a temporary phenomenon, and little support is required to address their housing situation.

- A Rooflessness (i.e. street homelessness or “rough sleeping”)
- B Living in emergency/temporary accommodation for homeless people in hostels/night shelters
- C Living long term in institutions because no other accommodation is available
- D Bed and breakfast or similar accommodation unsuitable for the long term
- E Informal/insecure/impermanent accommodation with friends, or under notice to quit, or squatting
- F Intolerable physical conditions, including overcrowding
- G Involuntary sharing (e.g. abusive relationships)

Source: Adapted from Anderson and Christian (2003)

Table I.
Categories
of homelessness
situations

(Pleace, 1997). However, certain groups are overrepresented among the single homeless population, particularly in the most acute homelessness circumstances such as rough sleeping and emergency hostel accommodation. These include those with mental health problems; substance misusers; care leavers and ex offenders (Pleace and Quilgars, 2003). Fitzpatrick (2006) argues that this group of homeless people, with multiple aspects to their exclusion, is seen as the non-respectable poor who have fallen through gaps in welfare provision. Many of these people with more acute or multiple needs are long-term homeless or experience multiple episodes of homelessness (Fitzpatrick, 2006). It is this group of homeless people that social enterprise has been targeted with helping (ODPM, 2003a, 2005; CLG, 2007), particularly as a route into mainstream employment.

The policy focus on equipping homeless people for mainstream employment may derive in part from the “pathways” research literature which examines routes into and out of homelessness in order to help understand possible solutions. For example, McNaughton (2005) undertook a qualitative longitudinal study of a sample of homeless people over a 12 month period. A key finding was that for some participants, accessing sustainable employment marked the point at which they felt they had escaped homelessness (McNaughton, 2005). There may be a tendency among policy makers and practitioners to confuse cause and effect. Accessing sustainable employment might be a consequence of social inclusion rather than a cause. As McNaughton notes, for most participants, accessing employment was not seen as a viable option as the benefits trap meant that there was no financial incentive. For others, the pressure of having a full time job led them to relapse into drug or alcohol abuse (McNaughton, 2005). This would suggest that employment is not a viable option for all homeless people, particularly in the short-term. Indeed, Pleace and Bretherton (2007) argue that government policy, with particular reference to welfare to work programmes, tends to be less effective for homeless people, particularly those with acute or multiple aspects to their exclusion.

Instead, many longer term homeless people require ongoing personalised support (such as counseling) to resolve homelessness and begin resettlement in the community (Rosengard *et al.*, 2002; Harding and Willett, 2008). It may be that many homeless people with acute or multiple needs are better served (at least initially) by less formal approaches to social inclusion that focus on engaging homeless people with mainstream services and providing a space for them to interact with other people sharing similar experiences (for example day centres) (Smith, 2008).

While noting that housing need is the only common factor faced by all homeless people, Pleace (1997) draws upon the research literature to outline a range of additional needs that may require addressing to enable the successful resettlement of a homeless person into the community (Table II).

It is plausible that social enterprise may be able to address some or all of these needs.

3. In what ways does social enterprise respond to the needs of homeless people?

According to Peattie and Morley (2008), the only defining characteristics of social enterprise are an activity involving trading combined with the primacy of social purpose. This section traces a history of different forms of trading for a social purpose in the homelessness field. In doing so, it becomes apparent that a number of overlapping approaches or models are covered by the umbrella term “social enterprise” in the field of homelessness (Table III).

From 1879, Salvation Army staff/volunteers sold the magazine “War Cry” (www1.salvationarmy.org.uk/uki/www_uki_ihc.nsf/vwsearch/3296EB43555BCEBD8025709600399881?opendocument), and the income from sales was used to part subsidise services to homeless people. This represents one of the earliest forms of trading for a social purpose by third sector organisations (TSOs) in the field. In this sense, social enterprise is best seen as a revenue raising strategy pursued by TSOs (Dees, 1998). More recently, numerous TSOs in the field have combined the sale of a product with a plea to the

Table II.
Range of needs that may need addressing before homeless people can be successfully resettled in the community

Housing need	Housing should be of a reasonable standard, affordable and safe
Support needs	Including medical needs and assistance with cooking and self-care for those physically unable to look after themselves
Daily living skills	Training in how to cope living independently, for example learning how to cook and pay bills
Financial needs	For many homeless people, their situation is linked directly to income poverty
Social needs	The provision of emotional support. Also, the need to tackle social isolation by offering access to social networks and something to do during the day

Source: Adapted from Pleace (1999, p. 162)

Table III.
Models of social enterprise in the field of homelessness

Model of social enterprise	Description	Example
Revenue generator/mission awareness raising	Social enterprise as an income stream or means of raising awareness for TSOs. The trading activity is not central to social goals, income is diverted to other parts of the organisation. Thus, social enterprise is an activity – trading to fund social purpose, rather than an organisational type	Salvation Army War Cry
Contracted service provider	Homelessness-related organisations delivering government contracts	Shelter
Accommodation providers charging for beds	Hostel and supported accommodation providers offering places to homeless people. Revenue is usually derived wholly or in part through housing benefit paid by the state	St Mungoes
Participation-based community	Alternative safe living spaces for homeless people offering a holistic lifestyle within a supportive environment. Revenue is derived through a mix of trading and housing-related benefits	Emmaus
Employment provider	Social enterprises whose primary objective is to allow homeless people to earn an income. Employment (or self-employment) may be a temporary stepping stone to the mainstream labour market or long term (sheltered)	Big Issue
Training and work experience	Social enterprises providing homeless people with the chance to gain qualifications and/or work experience with the aim of moving them into the labour market	Crisis cafe
Hybrid	Social enterprises combining two or more of the above models	Big Life Company

heartstrings to help fund their social goals. For example, the sale of Christmas cards by Shelter, and cookery books by Crisis. Trading is not central to the social goal of the organisation and income is diverted to service provision or campaigning arms. This model relates closely to Alter's (2007) "external" social enterprise, so-called because the business activity is external to the social programme. However, in each case, the trading activity is also important in raising awareness of an organisation's social mission.

In the 1970s, campaigning TSOs such as Shelter and Crisis moved into the realm of delivering services (such as housing advice, employment advice and training) to homeless people (Joseph, 2009). Originally, these services were funded by voluntary donations of time and money. More recently, service providers have become increasingly reliant on state aid, initially in the form of grants, and later through contracting mechanisms. Since the election of New Labour in 1997, the third sector has been seen as entering into a new partnership with the state. The state effectively chooses which services should be delivered and acts as overseer of the delivery process (May *et al.*, 2005). Once services are delivered and funded through contract mechanisms, TSOs are effectively drawn into trading for a social purpose. TSOs delivering public services can be seen as a contracted service provider model of social enterprise.

In the 1980s, housing associations (HAs) started to play a more significant role in the then conservative government's attempt to revive social rented housing (Murie, 1997). They have since been seen as potentially playing a more important role in helping local authorities discharge their duties under homelessness legislation (ODPM, 2003b). However, for most HAs, responding directly to homelessness is unlikely to become a major part of their activities (Mullins and Murie, 2006). Nonetheless, around 40 per cent of hostel providers in a study carried out by May *et al.* (2005) were registered social landlords. All of these "accommodation providers" relied on housing benefit for part of their income and so were effectively trading for a social purpose.

A more radical form of social enterprise used to tackle homelessness can be traced to Emmaus in France who were set up in 1952 to create communities for homeless people to live in (<http://beehive.thisisbristol.com/default.asp?WCI=SiteHome&ID=7915&PageID=42782>), and supported themselves through recycling and selling items that people no longer want (Clarke *et al.*, 2008). Emmaus spread to England in 1990 after a volunteer at a soup run in Cambridge decided to recreate the concept he had encountered in Paris (<http://beehive.thisisbristol.com/default.asp?WCI=SiteHome&ID=7915&PageID=42782>). The first UK community opened in 1992 in Cambridge (Clarke *et al.*, 2008). "Companions" agree to give up non-housing-related benefits. Housing benefit (and supporting people allowances where applicable) contribute towards the costs of providing accommodation. The majority of income is derived through the selling of recycled items. From the surplus companions are paid an allowance (£32 a week in 2004). This "participation-based community" model of social enterprise provides a "safe" or alternative living space for homeless people. For some homeless people, a participation-based community can be a stepping stone back into mainstream society. For others (particularly those with learning disabilities), the participation-based community can serve as a more permanent home (Clarke *et al.*, 2008). The participation-based community model not only draws upon the accommodation provider model previously identified, but also can be seen as a new innovation that paved the way for work integration social enterprises in the homelessness field.

In the first decade of the new millennium, there has been considerable growth in the number of social enterprise initiatives aiming to benefit homeless people. These have been particularly prominent in the area of work integration. While Davister *et al.* (2004) identify four types of work integration, for the purposes of this paper; it is sufficient to distinguish between “training” social enterprises and those directly providing the opportunity to earn an income. The training and work experience model involves social enterprise as a vehicle to train homeless people in preparation for entering the mainstream labour market. For example, Crisis has a café open to the general public, and claims that formerly homeless trainees receive individually structured training leading to recognised qualifications (www.crisis.org.uk/page.builder/skylightcafe.html).

The second approach to work integration relates more closely to the social firm whereby businesses aim to provide homeless people the opportunity to earn a legitimate income. This may be long-term (sheltered) or a stepping stone to the mainstream labour market. However, for some people the social problems that have caused their homelessness may be so complex or acute that their productivity makes it uneconomic for an organisation to employ them without public subsidy (Laville *et al.*, 2006). Nonetheless, a small number of social enterprises are able to generate a surplus and provide homeless people with the opportunity to earn a legitimate income. These organisations tend to adopt an approach whereby the homeless person becomes a self-employed contractor rather than directly providing paid employment. This effectively transfers risk from the social enterprise to the homeless person. Perhaps, the most innovative and well-known social enterprise of this type is The Big Issue.

The Big Issue was born in London in 1991, inspired by Gordon Roddick who imported the street newspaper model from the USA. The first edition hit the streets in September 1991 (Swithinbank, 2001). Homeless people purchase the magazine from the wholesaler and sell it to members of the public. The Big Issue can be distinguished from the Salvation Army’s War Cry in that homeless people are directly involved in the trading activity and benefit directly from the exchange. Using homeless people to sell a product can be seen as bridging a divide between philanthropy and self-help. Hibbert *et al.* (2005) suggest that the desire to help homeless people get back on their feet was the primary motivation for most consumers buying the magazine. This overrode any utilitarian value attached to the product.

While these models suggest distinctive ways of working, on the ground the picture is more blurred. A number of social enterprises combine two or more of the different approaches within a single “hybrid” model. For example, the Big Issue in the North merged with diverse resources at the turn of the millennium to create the Big Life Company, one of the UK’s largest social enterprises with businesses in areas including childcare, healthcare, buildings maintenance and employment training. The new social enterprise was able to make synergies between the various subsidiaries. Thus, the Big Issue in the North could refer vendors to the employment training subsidiary, who would receive payment from the state to train people to move into work (Teasdale, 2006). Some of those undergoing training would move into employment with other social businesses within the Big Life umbrella, triggering further outcome-related payments from the state. For example, the buildings maintenance arm employed ex-homeless people and provided maintenance to buildings occupied by the other social businesses (Teasdale, 2006). A subsidiary charity has been set up to attract charitable funding to help meet the social needs of clients. Thus, the Big Life Company has been able to create

an integrated pathway towards employment for homeless people. This hybrid model also involves hybrid resource mixes, relying to differing extents on volunteers, trading in the market, state contracts, grants and charitable donations (Gardin, 2006).

To some extent, this blurring of models may be attributed to institutional isomorphism within the field of homelessness, whereby following a period of innovation, coercive pressure from the state (Aiken, 2006), mimetic processes (or imitation in times of uncertainty) and the normative pressures of professionals working within the sector (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) lead to organisations within the field taking on a similar structure. Each of these different models can be seen as innovative before being mimicked by other organisations. Additionally, the role of CLG in promoting social enterprise as a route to employment for homeless people can be seen as coercing TSOs to adopt a “training and work experience” model through offering financial incentives (Teasdale, 2009). For example, the Hostels Capital Improvement Programme provided £90 million to “accommodation providers” from 2005 to 2008. One of the criteria to win funding was that hostels should develop “social enterprises” to help prepare homeless people for employment (CLG, 2006, 2007). It is unclear what (if any) evidence lay behind the promotion of this model of social enterprise.

4. What difference might social enterprise make to homeless people?

The research literature on the impact of social enterprise on beneficiaries remains underdeveloped, particularly in the field of homelessness. The small numbers of studies that do exist independently reach similar conclusions.

Social enterprises must balance competing social and economic goals (Dart, 2004; Russell and Scott, 2007; Spear *et al.*, 2009). Case studies have shown that “employment provider” social enterprises trading in the marketplace to provide homeless people with the opportunity to earn an income have been unable to generate sufficient surplus to provide wider social support to clients (Mulgan *et al.*, 2008; Pharoah *et al.*, 2004; Russell and Scott, 2007; Tracey and Jarvis, 2007). Thus, although social enterprises can assist with work integration and financial need, the provision of housing advice, long-term support to live independently and access to supportive social networks, must be funded by other means or delivered by other providers (Aspire Foundation, 2008). Some social enterprises have set up separate charitable trusts to attract funding and deliver this social support to their clients (Russell and Scott, 2007).

The “contracted service provider” model of social enterprise may exclude those beneficiaries with the most acute social needs (Dart, 2004). This is because outcome-related payments appear to encourage social enterprises to “skim off” those clients easiest to place into employment or provide advice to Laville *et al.* (2006); Nyssens and Plateau (2006); Aiken and Bode (2009). Social enterprises using this model may face pressure to abandon those homeless people with the most complex needs. In the short-term, this may be justified as there are other providers delivering social support to those with more complex needs (Dart, 2004).

“Skimming off” is not inherent to all social enterprises contracting with the state. Some “accommodation providers” appear able to avoid this. In one case, the social-economic tension was negotiated by separating responsibility for income generation from responsibility for providing social support. This was facilitated as housing benefit and supporting people payments provided a relatively constant and secure income stream. Hence, the project manager could aim to maximise the social support provided to residents

within a fixed budget (Teasdale, 2006). This would suggest that different state contracting mechanisms have differential impacts on social enterprises and their homeless clients. It would appear that the contracting mechanism used in supporting people has led to improved quality of accommodation and services for homeless people (Buckingham, 2009).

Little is known about the impact of the other models on homeless people, although a cost benefit analysis of a “participation based community” does find significant benefit to the wider community (Clarke *et al.*, 2008). As regards the “revenue generator/mission awareness raiser” model, it is unlikely that there is a direct impact on the beneficiary as the homeless person is not directly involved in the trading activity. However, this model may be a useful way of raising funds to deliver social support to beneficiaries.

5. Areas for further research

Policy support for social enterprise as a means to tackling homelessness is not evidence based, but would seem to rely upon hypothetical assumption and anecdotal evidence. This does not mean that social enterprise models cannot deliver positive outcomes for homeless people. However, it is likely that the next decade will see a more constrained funding environment and that social enterprises and TSOs seeking state support will need to demonstrate their positive outcomes. A number of gaps in the literature suggest fruitful areas for future research. First:

RQ1. How do different models of social enterprise balance the tension between social and economic objectives, and what are the implications for clients?

This paper identified two approaches to managing the tension between social and economic objectives, including creating a separate charitable trust to help meet the needs of the most excluded groups, or relying on other TSOs to meet the needs of those clients whom a market mechanism renders unprofitable. Further research is required in order to understand the ways in which different models of social enterprise balance the tension between social and economic objectives with particular reference to the impact on homeless people. This will enable policy makers and practitioners to develop a “horses for courses” approach matching the most suitable to services to people dependent upon their individual circumstances:

RQ2. How do social enterprises compare with other organisational types in responding to homelessness?

Some models of social enterprise are not able to respond to the needs of the most excluded homeless people. For the majority of homeless people with less complex needs, social enterprise does have a role to play. Contracted service providers do deliver housing advice and shelter. The Big Issue offers the opportunity to earn an income. Training and work experience social enterprises offer the opportunity to gain new skills, qualifications and self-esteem. For those homeless people whose situation is more permanent, participation-based communities can offer a safer alternative lifestyle that in some cases might lead to reintegration into society and the mainstream labour market. The employment provider models offers temporary and occasionally permanent employment opportunities. However, there are insufficient comparative studies to enable us to understand how different models of social enterprises compare with public, with private and with other third sector providers in responding to homelessness:

RQ3. What happens to the most excluded groups if processes of isomorphism lead to the third sector becoming more business orientated?

Finally, evidence suggests that as TSOs become more business-like there may be pressure to abandon their most excluded clients. This marginalisation of the most excluded would seem to be a direct consequence of the need to generate a surplus. At its simplest, these groups are not profitable enough to work with. Thus, becoming more business-like can alter an organisations social aims, or the client group it works with. As the third sector faces increasing pressure from inside and outside to become more business orientated this begets the question: what is the impact of this commercialisation on those homeless people with the most acute needs?

6. Implications for policy and practice

The promotion of social enterprise as a route to employment for homeless people has not been based on any reliable evidence. It is not known whether social enterprises are better equipped than other organisational types to move homeless people into employment. What evidence that does exist suggests that social enterprise as a route to employment may only be appropriate for those homeless people with less complex social support needs.

Less attention has been paid by CLG to the role of social enterprise in delivering accommodation, advice and wider social support to those homeless people with more acute social needs. To some extent, this is a language issue. CLG have played an important role in reducing levels of (statutory) homelessness and rough sleeping over the last decade. They have also directly improved the quality of temporary and emergency accommodation provided to those homeless people not entitled to permanent housing. However, it is important to be aware of the range of potential roles offered by different models of social enterprise, and to consider ways in which these might be tailored to the circumstances of the individual homeless person. Whether or not a social enterprise model can be used to deliver wider social support to homeless people will depend on the future priorities of state agencies (or other funders), and the contracting mechanisms employed.

Social enterprise should not be seen as a panacea by government or by the third sector. However, some projects may be deliverable using social enterprise models. Other projects, particularly the provision of social support to homeless people, are likely to require more diversified income streams. It may be possible for some social enterprises and TSOs to offer integrated packages of support to homeless people with different levels of need and at different stages in their pathways out of homelessness. Each activity or programme might be funded in different ways or by different models of social enterprise.

For smaller organisations, it may prove beneficial to form close links with other organisations working with clients with different levels of need, and/or with organisations providing different services to similar client groups. In this way, smaller organisations can develop expertise in specific areas. Hence, an emergency accommodation provider might link with a training and work experience provider in order that once the homeless person's residual housing need is satisfied they can begin to search for employment. The chain would be enhanced if the training and work experience provider is linked to a contracted service provider able to access outcome-related payments for moving homeless people into employment. At the other end of the chain, soup run providers could be "encouraged"

or paid to refer homeless clients to organisations providing accommodation and/or wider social support. However, this raises questions about the nature of collaboration between social enterprises and TSOs operating in a competitive funding environment.

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