Project brief

Giving a voice to those experiencing homelessness

Homelessness is a growing and distressing issue in the UK affecting hundreds of thousands of people and consuming huge government and voluntary resources – the government spends £2billion per year. Yet there is surprisingly little research giving voice to those experiencing homelessness. How do they see their situation and needs? What works for them? What are their aspirations and fears?

In the commercial world it would be unthinkable to design services and try to meet customer needs without a deep understanding of the customer. In the world of homelessness the language used is overwhelmingly that of the service provider and gatekeeper. We need to hear the voice of the customer louder and clearer.

The purpose of this brief is to invite the UK market research industry to contribute to building a better understanding by bringing the toolkit of modern research tools and analysis techniques to the problem. Possible ways to this are:

- Pro-bono research – either as an industry effort or individual companies/individuals
- Building awareness of what research has already been done
- Suggesting research techniques and methods that could be applied

If this were a commercial problem we would be asking:

- How do people in housing need see themselves?
- How do they define their situation and needs and what would be a successful outcome in their eyes? What are their aspirations and fears?
- How many people really are homeless and in different types of housing need?
- What do they see as the causes? Is homelessness really the root problem or an outcome of deeper problems?
- What resources do they have to help themselves?
- What do they know about the services available to help? What helps/hinders them from accessing the services?
- How are services actually used? Why do people drop out of service use? Why do some people persist in homelessness for years?
- How should services be designed to help them find solutions (or prevent homelessness from occurring)?
- Are there groups with common needs (segmentation)?

The remainder of this brief sets out some background and references describing the nature and extent of homelessness. It also points to some existing research and data sources.

The scale of homelessness in the UK

Homelessness is a growing and distressing issue in the UK with a huge human an economic cost to our country. Central and local government spends £2 billion per year on measures to alleviate homelessness in England[1] and approximately 900 charities, national and local are involved (source: New Philanthropy Capital).

Precise measurement of the scale of the problem is challenging due to the fragmented nature of data collection (much of it done by local authorities), intrinsic problems of measurement (e.g. counting rough sleepers) and difficulties in definition of what constitutes homelessness and/or who qualifies for government assistance. Therefore, estimates of total the total number of homeless people vary. Some key headline numbers are:

- 4,667 rough sleepers in England in autumn 2018 (more than double the level in 2010). Source: Local Authority Street Counts aggregated by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. It is widely accepted that the methodology used significantly underestimates the total number (only those actually bedded down on a given night are counted).
- 360,000 total homeless in England. This figure compiled by Shelter in Nov 2018 adds rough sleepers, people in hostels, people in temporary accommodation and people living with friends/relatives/sofa surfing and owed a housing duty by social services[2].

The scale and increase in homelessness, particularly the very visible increase in rough sleeping has led to widespread public concern. 77% of people in Great Britain say they are concerned or very concerned about homelessness (YouGov April 2019 Survey commissioned by Oxford Homeless Movement). An IPSOS survey for Crisis[3] showed that a fifth of people in the UK personally knew someone affected by homelessness.

Despite the scale of the problem, the voice of those who are experiencing homelessness is not very prominent in the reporting about homelessness or in the publicity and literature of the organisations with a mission to alleviate it. What is published often focuses on the most extreme cases and transformation/success stories. The terminology used is that of the agency or service provider. People are classified according to their qualification to access services e.g. "statutorily homeless", "no-recourse to public funds," "intentionally homeless." Or characterised by their "problem" for instance "complex needs," "persistent rough sleeper," "difficult to engage," "ex-offender." These are not the terms that these people would use to describe themselves as one of the rare research studies, commissioned from Kantar by Shelter shows[4]. Indeed, some respondents would even reject the term "homeless" as a label.

Previous research and available data

The research and data available for the UK falls into the following categories:

- Attempts to quantify the scale of the problem for planning and monitoring (typically by government and local government) or for lobbying purposes (by charities). The sources can be specific efforts to collect data, as for the rough sleeping count, or the recording of stages of a statutory process such as the number of people qualifying for a particular service. A newer initiative is the

establishment in London of a database called CHAIN[5] which seeks to systematically collect and share data on service users enabling a more connected and intelligent approach to service provision and to better understand what works by tracking service users.

- Small scale quantitative studies of specific user groups. These capture rich qualitative data that often features verbatims from the respondents. The number of studies seems to be few. Three examples are: rough sleepers in Nottingham,[6] rough sleepers in London and Sheffield[7] and children in London[8].

Gaps in knowledge and key questions

Considering the enormous resources spent by government and charities in trying to provide solutions to those facing homelessness, the lack of research into the users of the services is remarkable. The range of techniques used is limited and somewhat traditional. There is little use of big data. As a result, services are often not user centred and those that are can be difficult to scale. To give two examples; from the limited research available it seems clear that:

- The need for users to repeatedly relate their story and circumstances is a common frustration that wastes time and can even cause people to give up on the quest for support.
- The experience of hostels is overwhelmingly negative and yet they remain one of the main "solutions" offered.

This stands in stark contrast to the commercial world where businesses are able to understand consumers lives in great detail to inform service and product design. So how could modern research, data management and analytic methods be used to help answer the following questions:

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- How many people really are homeless and in different types of housing need?
- What do they see as the causes? Is homelessness really the root problem or an outcome of deeper problems?
- What resources do they have to help themselves?
- What do they know about the services available to help? What helps/hinders them from accessing the services?
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Scope

The research should cover those included in Shelter's definition of homelessness: https://england.shelter.org.uk/housing_advice/homelessness/rules/what_is_homelessne ss. In addition to those who are on the streets and have nowhere at all, this includes those:

- staying with friends or family
- staying in a hostel, night shelter or B&B
- squatting (because you have no legal right to stay)
- at risk of **violence or abuse in your home**
- living in poor conditions that affect your health
- living apart from your family because you don't have a place to live together

The research can include those who have had experience of homelessness in the past as well as those experiencing homelessness today. It should also include those who have never contacted statutory or voluntary services for help and those who have dropped out of services in addition to those using services today.

Geographically the scope is Great Britain.

1   https://www.ft.com/content/447abc56-65d8-11e9-9adc-98bf1d35a056
2   https://england.shelter.org.uk/media/press_releases/articles/320,000_people_in_britain_are_now_homeless,_as_numbers_keep_rising
3   https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/reality-homelessness-close-home-britains-youth
4   https://england.shelter.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/1486187/Describing_people_in_housing_need.pdf
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