Losing and Finding a Home:
homelessness, multiple exclusion and everyday lives

By **Philip Brown**, **Gareth Morris**, **Lisa Scullion** and **Peter Somerville**
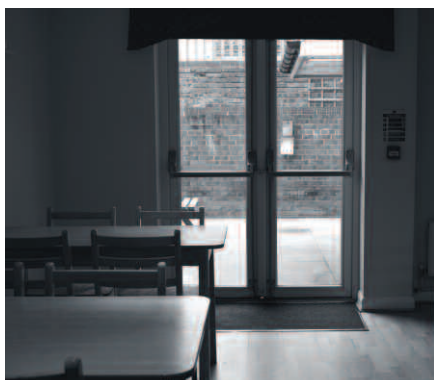
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complex lives

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We have established a blog through which our thoughts and findings have been disseminated to a wide audience during the course of our research: http://homelessinstoke.com/

A graphic novel is also available: Somewhere Nowhere: Lives without homes illustrated by Sam Dahl and edited by Gareth Morris, Philip Brown, Lisa Scullion and Peter Somerville, Lulu http://www.lulu.com/gb/

1 Introduction

In 2009 the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) launched a co-funded programme of research into 'Multiple Exclusion Homelessness'. The aim of the programme was to help inform national and local policy and practice when tackling homelessness across the United Kingdom (UK). The development of a new term 'multiple exclusion homelessness' was purposeful in order to explore the lives of those people in society who are among the most vulnerable. Rather than creating a new layer of the homeless population, the 'multiple exclusion' focus aimed to bring into view the complex interplay of issues such as: worklessness, poverty, severe mental health problems, drug and alcohol dependencies, state care, the criminal justice system and so on. Furthermore, it was of central interest to the programme to explore how coping and survival strategies were played out; for example, sex work, begging, criminality, street drinking and drug-dealing, and what connection, if any, these activities had to the prevalence and experience of homelessness.

As part of this programme researchers at the Universities of Salford and Lincoln, along with the support of an advisory group, were commissioned to undertake a two-year study focused on understanding the lives of people with experience of homelessness and/or multiple exclusion, in whatever form that took, within the city of Stoke-on-Trent.

The starting point for our research was to transcend an analysis of homelessness that focuses upon housing supply, demand and costs in order to explore the role of factors such as family history, poverty and the breakdown of social relationships. The research aimed to look at how such factors featured within people's lives, and particularly how they related to individuals' experience of homelessness.

Multiple Exclusion Homelessness in the UK

A key driver of the research (and the wider Multiple Exclusion Homelessness programme) was the formation of Making Every Adult Matter (MEAM). This is a coalition of four national charities (Clinks, DrugScope, Homeless Link and Mind), to influence policy and services for adults with multiple needs and exclusions. Together, these charities represent over 1,600 frontline organisations working in the criminal justice, drug treatment, homelessness and mental health sectors. MEAM published a manifesto in September 2009, which emphasised the need for research in this area and set out important issues for researchers to consider (MEAM, 2009).

The existence of people with multiple needs and exclusions was first highlighted by government in a report by the Cabinet Office (2006), and MEAM (2009: 8) define them as those who:

'experience a combination of issues that impact adversely on their lives are routinely excluded from effective contact with services they need tend to lead chaotic lives that are costly to society.'

This definition is far from precise, but the intention was to include all those who needed assistance from a number of different services but for whom, currently, for a variety of reasons, the quality of assistance they receive is insufficient to meet their needs. The individuals who fit this definition are mainly to be found either in prison or among the homeless population. MEAM (2009: 20) calculate that there are at least 81,162 such individuals in prison, 42,000 individuals in the non-statutory homelessness sector, and 15,000 individuals in statutory homelessness temporary accommodation, making a total of 140,000 multiply excluded individuals in the UK (although a conservative estimate).

Given this strong statistical association between multiple exclusion and homelessness, it seems entirely reasonable that research should aim to improve our understanding of this link. The nature of what has come to be called 'multiple exclusion homelessness' (MEH), however, is less precise, and is more contested, than multiple exclusion. This is, at least in part, because homelessness has never been purely a housing problem but has always been associated with other major problems (so-called 'risk' factors). Consequently, it is not possible to draw a clear distinction between MEH and homelessness more generally. However, it is clear that some homeless people do have more complex and more numerous problems than others, and require more intensive and extensive support to solve those problems. It is these people that we are concerned with when we talk about multiply excluded homeless people. As a working definition, therefore, we suggest that Multiple Exclusion Homelessness refers to someone who is:

'being adversely affected by a combination of factors such as family conflict, worklessness, poverty, mental ill health, substance misuse, physical impairments, and personal traumas, plus episodes of homelessness. They are routinely excluded from effective contact from services, may be living chaotic lives and can experience serious difficulty in achieving settled accommodation or sustaining a tenancy.'

The situation in Stoke-on-Trent

Our focus upon Stoke-on-Trent for this research was not accidental. The city was identified for two interconnected reasons. Firstly, the significant decline of the traditional industries in the city. Residents of the city had mainly been employed in the ceramics industry, in the production of steel, and the production of rubber for the tyre industry. There were also a number of coal mines in and around the city, as well as across the North Staffordshire sub-region more generally. Therefore, a main driver of the city's previous socio-economic prosperity was a significant reliance on primary and secondary industries. Industrial decline and rationalisations in the remaining firms were exacerbated by a failure to secure a position for growing service industries within the city (Imrie, 1991). This led to significant levels of unemployment, particularly amongst women who had been working in the largely feminised pottery industry. While industrial neighbours such as Birmingham, Nottingham, Manchester and Sheffield have adapted and developed after a similar experience of industrial decline, Stoke-on-Trent's response to global structural and institutional change has been weaker, resulting in a long period of economic and social deprivation (Jayne 2000).

Secondly, the city is currently ranked 17th most deprived under the 2010 Indices of Multiple Deprivation, with around a third of the city amongst the most deprived. The levels of deprivation and poverty in Stoke-on-Trent, combined with an historical reliance on social housing, have led to a unique set of issues for the city. Such issues have only been, and are continuing to be, compounded by the recent recession and reduction in public sector spending.

A further reason for focusing upon Stoke-on-Trent when looking at homelessness has been the City Council's relatively recent concentration of resources on homelessness prevention following a full review of services in 2005. This was supported by the creation of a 'Priority Needs Group' formed of key agencies (see Chapter 7 for further information); a single 'Housing Solutions Service'; rent deposit schemes; an innovative empty homes project; and the development of mediation services. This may help to explain why the acceptance rates for homelessness fell by up to 25ppc in late 2008, although they have risen again more recently, reflecting trends across the country as a whole (CLG, 2012).

Current policy in England

This research rests upon a particular political canvas. The Homelessness Act 2002 required all local housing authorities to publish a five-year strategy to address the issues of homelessness in their areas. Local authorities recognised that there were various conditions linked to homelessness, such as previous arrears of rent or mortgage, substance misuse and poor health. The 2002 Act introduced a new emphasis on homelessness prevention (see in particular CLG, 2003), and many of the authorities' homelessness strategies identified a need for further research into the 'causes' of homelessness – that is, to gain a better understanding of what is going on in the lives of homeless people in order to be able to prevent homelessness from recurring or from happening in the first
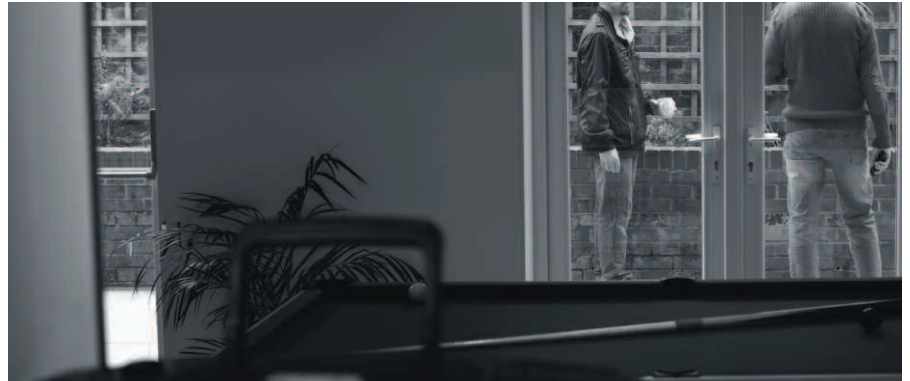
place. It was seen that, in the absence of such understanding, local authority responses to homelessness were likely to continue to be reactive rather than strategic. We are currently approaching the end of the second round of these strategies, which commenced in 2008 and are due to run until 2013. The official evaluation of the first round (Housing Quality Network Services, 2004) found that local housing authorities were taking their new responsibilities seriously, and that there were common perceptions across the country concerning the immediate precipitating factors of homelessness, namely:

- parents/friends/other relatives no longer willing or able to accommodate

- violent relationship breakdown with partner

- loss of tenancy through termination of an assured shorthold tenancy.

(HQN Services, 2004: 9)

In addition to the Homelessness Act (2002) and subsequent strategies, the government also issued The Homelessness (Suitability of Accommodation) (England) Order (2003). This Order stated that by March 2004, no family with children should have to live in bed and breakfast accommodation, except in an emergency and for no more than six months – a target that was achieved by all but 16 local authorities. Additionally, in 2005, the government set a target to halve the numbers of homeless households in temporary accommodation (to 50,500), which was met by June 2010 (Wilson, 2012).

Since the inception of the Rough Sleepers Strategy in 1998, the government has invested considerably in hostel provision. The Hostels Capital Improvements Programme was introduced in 2005, which spent £90 million over three years to modernise and change the functions of hostels, and this was succeeded by the Places of Change Programme in 2008, with a budget of £80 million to spend over a further period of three years (Crane et al, 2011: 2). This programme achieved substantial improvements in the quality of hostel provision for homeless people. Consequently, rough sleeping was reduced by two thirds by 2008. The government then announced a new strategy to end rough sleeping by 2012 (No one left out: Communities ending rough sleeping), and made £200 million of funding available to local authorities and voluntary organisations to achieve this end (CLG, 2008). This 2012 target has been retained by the current Coalition government, with a total of £400 million being made available to achieve this target (CLG, 2011). The Coalition government has also set up a Ministerial Working Group on homelessness, involving eight government departments, and allocated a £20 million Homelessness Transition Fund to identify and help people sleeping rough as quickly as possible.

There is concern, however, that the progress achieved over the last 14 years or more, especially in reducing numbers of homeless households and of homeless people in temporary accommodation, is being set back on a number of fronts. For a number of reasons, mainly related to the credit crunch and the associated bursting of the house price bubble, there has been an increase in statutory homelessness (households accepted by local authorities as unintentionally homeless and in priority need) by 10% in 2010/11, and an increase in the use of temporary accommodation for homeless people since March 2011, each of which reverses a trend of falling

numbers over the previous five years (CIH/NHF/Shelter, 2011). Reductions in the Supporting People budget (which funds supported housing services) from April 2011, reductions in spending on housing benefit from April 2012, and reductions in spending to be introduced in 2013 arising from the Welfare Reform Act 2012, not to mention reductions in other public and voluntary sector services, all have significant effects both on levels of homelessness and on the capacity of services to help homeless people. Furthermore, even the continued commitment to end rough sleeping has been questioned on the basis that it appears to deny the agency of homeless people, who may be attempting to escape intolerable housing situations, and does not recognise the complexity and multiplicity of their needs.

Given all of this, it is understandable that there is little national emphasis now on developing strategic approaches to homelessness or on evaluating current local authority homelessness strategies. Furthermore - and of particular importance for our research - there is little recognition by the Coalition government of the need to look more carefully and deeply into the lives of homeless people in order to understand how their needs might best be met. One could cite, for example, the case of victims of domestic violence, where service provision has not previously been plentiful now appear to be contracting (McCabe, 2012). However, there are perhaps two positive signs: one is the attention now being given to tackling the needs of so-called 'troubled families' (Cameron, 2011), for whom homelessness is an ever-present risk; the other is the renewed interest in 'invest to save' models of public spending, which suggests that greater amounts of public spending may be permitted, providing that it can demonstrate that savings will result from such spending.

This report

This report aims to draw greater attention to 'multiply excluded homeless' people, their circumstances, their past challenges and their everyday lives. It is not the intention of this report to count the number of occasions people became homeless, analyse people's lives in respect of their socio-economic status or identify simple correlations between homelessness and other experiences or conditions. Instead this report attempts to understand the roles that different factors play in people's lives related to whether they become homeless or not. The report will also show how people make sense of their past, present and possible future. Both homelessness, and the multiply complex lives that people lead, can be difficult to understand. Consequently, the 'solutions' and the strategies for tackling such issues need to be sensitive to this complexity. As this report will show, a range of actors can contribute to tackling homelessness and its underlying factors. The individuals themselves, their families, schools, employers and the wider communities are all involved in creating the conditions in which homelessness exists. As such, each of these actors can play their part in making responses to homelessness more effective.

2 The Research

This chapter outlines the methodological approach which underpinned the study and how we carried out the research.

Background

A complex interplay of processes creates social conditions within which homelessness tends to occur. This research project approached homelessness as a multidimensional phenomenon (Somerville, 1992) with homeless people viewed as complex social beings, with specific histories, living in specific environments, and relating to those environments and to other homeless and non-homeless people, in very different ways. The complexity is such that each individual follows a life course that is unique and cannot be reduced to a typical 'pathway' or pattern of movement in a single direction. In the terminology of complexity theory, individuals can make transitions from chaotic to stable states and back again, but each transition that is made is irreducibly different from any other transition.

Given the nature of this complexity, the search for 'risk factors' or for simple (i.e. non-complex) 'causal mechanisms' that can explain the incidence of homelessness yields little of any real value. As Mallett et al (2010: 10-11) explains using the example of young people:

'The problem with an all-embracing risk discourse is that it ignores the heterogeneity among young people, their individual realities, their gender, age, class, ethnicities and other differences… As many have noted, this discourse individualises both the problem and the solution, inferring that the 'at risk' individual is solely responsible for changing his or her behaviour. Moreover, it allows for some classes of young people – usually the most vulnerable and marginalised – to be stigmatised as greater 'risk takers'.'

Instead, our approach seeks to understand homelessness by attempting to understand the world as lived by the people themselves. A core assumption of this research is that people are influenced not just by their environment but by their constructs of that environment and of themselves. Following this approach we focus upon the kinds of narratives and stories people tell themselves and others about why they are doing what they are doing. We see these narratives, or personal stories, as forms of knowledge which provide 'organising principles' for everyday lives. The stories are communicated to the researcher who then interprets them, together with other stories. These other stories are told by other homeless people and by those who interact with homeless people (such as those who work for homelessness services). Together, these stories form part of the wider cultural narrative of homelessness, exclusion and everyday life.

The aim of the research has been to build a composite story that makes sense of a huge variety of homelessness stories. We have sought to find patterns within the data that are grounded in the lives of homeless people, rather than affirmation of the patterns described in previous research on homelessness. We have not assumed that there is anything particularly special about homelessness in the lives of any of the people that we have talked with, and we have taken care not to label them as 'multiply excluded'. Rather, we see homelessness as one episode, or series of episodes, amongst many that occur in a person's life.

The research itself

Our project focused on the lives of people in one case study area – Stoke-on-Trent. The following outlines who was involved in the project and the role they played.

Service providers

Within this study it was important to gain an understanding of the context in which homelessness services were delivered in the city. A number of people, working in various key services across Stoke-on-Trent, were invited to take part in the research as interviewees. A total of 18 people, representing 12 key services across the area, took part in semi-structured interviews during spring and summer 2010. We also drew on the lively and helpful discussions held at the regular project advisory group meetings. Participating organisations represented the statutory, voluntary and community sector.

[Homeless] people

The core component of the study was the generation of data with people with experience of homelessness and/or who could be seen, in some way, as 'multiply excluded'. To make contact with such people, we relied upon the advisory group and their network of contacts across the area. The majority of people who were invited to take part in the study were receiving services from an agency, or had received services at some point in the past.

An interview schedule was not used as a means of data collection. Instead we collected data by employing one of two approaches. The first was a single generative question approach – where the individual (story teller) was invited to tell the interviewer (listener) their life story with minimal interjections by the listener. The second was a 'life story' approach where people were asked to think of their lives as books (McAdams, 1993). Using this approach, people were invited to divide their life into chapters and talk about how these chapters were organised, the key events in each chapter, who the key people were, what their memories were, the turning points in their lives, and so on. Each interviewee/storyteller could choose the sort of approach they were most comfortable with. What we aimed to do was to provide the individual story-teller with 'room to speak' (Mishler, 1986) in order to tell the story of their life.

A key part of the study was to ensure we were able to account for the diversity of experiences of homelessness within the area. Over the period from spring/summer 2010 to spring 2011 we collected the life stories of 104 people. At the outset we intended people to represent three broad categories:

1 First time or very little experience of homelessness;
2 Repeated homelessness over their life course; and
3 People who had experienced multiple concentrated disadvantages but had not become homeless.

During the course of the study it has been difficult to allocate our sample into these discrete categories. For instance, many people who initially appeared to have been homeless only once, reported episodes of sofa surfing or entry into hostels once they began telling their stories.

Similarly, many people who had experienced concentrated disadvantage and/or chaotic lives reported experiences of homelessness – albeit less prolonged – at some point in their lives. Instead of removing these accounts from our sample we acknowledge that the difficulties of categorising individuals serve as further evidence of the complexity of individual lives. All interviews were carried out by one member of the research team. The analysis of the data was carried out by all team members.

For the analysis of narratives in the life-story interviews, we underwent two connected processes. Firstly, we re-drafted the life stories of individuals chronologically in order to understand and explore the perceived sequences of events and meaning attached to occurrences. Here we were able to identify themes that recur from one episode (or sequence of events) to another. Secondly, using NVivo, we analysed the transcripts line by line, enabling us to compare and contrast themes across the life-histories of different individuals. These two approaches have allowed the team to unpick the transcripts on a number of occasions in order to attempt to more fully understand the lives being narrated.

For service providers we took a thematic approach to the analysis, using Nvivo to help manage and code the data generated within the interviews.

In order to illustrate our findings we have used quotes from the interviews conducted. These quotations have been anonymised with identifying detail removed and, in the case of homeless and excluded participants, pseudonyms provided.

3 Key events and turning points

One of the most pressing questions asked by policy makers and researchers is why some people become homeless whilst others do not. The answer is far from simple. Much homelessness research focuses on particular issues, such as a lack of housing and inadequate care services, as well as individual behaviour, such as substance misuse and criminality, to help explain this connection. This approach, however, can mask the complexity of everyday life.

As this report seeks to illustrate, there are many events, set within particular contexts and populated by diverse characters, which all influence the course of our lives. In order to explore this further, this chapter focuses on two components: the key events that were reported as occurring immediately preceding a period of homelessness; and the times at which people, on reflection, felt they had reached a particular 'turning point' in their lives.

Key events preceding homelessness

A focus on key events in people's lives tends to evoke the 'risk factor' discourse criticised in chapter 2. Our research, however, is concerned with how these key events are seen and understood by the individuals themselves. As Mallett et al (2010) have observed, relying on the self-reporting of individuals can be both a strength and a weakness, as such reflections can only represent one side of a multi-sided story: 'A young person might cite their stepfather's violence as the reason they left home, but neglect to mention their own drug use as a factor in their family's conflict' (Mallett et al, 2010: 23). It could be argued, therefore, that a focus on the individual's own life story ignores alternative accounts of that life story, which might be provided by others. Further research, however, would be required in order to identify such alternative accounts.

To illustrate the complex background of individual lives, we have drawn upon three of the most common reasons given by people when asked about what happened immediately before they became homeless. These reasons are: getting kicked out from their family home; the ending of a relationship; and getting evicted by a landlord. Although these are the reasons given for why people have become homeless, by looking more closely at the individual biographies we can see the complex issues that permeate their lives.

> " *I got kicked out when I was 16 by mum's partner that she was with... I was a bit of a pain in the arse at school, I nicked a bit of money here and there like.* "

Getting kicked out

Billy was 23 years old when he was interviewed and living in a hostel. When asked when he had first become homeless, he replied:

"I got kicked out when I was 16 by mum's partner that she was with… I was a bit of a pain in the arse at school, I nicked a bit of money here and there like. I used to, [out of] my mum's purse." *(Billy, 23)*

Billy's story:

Billy reported having an unremarkable childhood but he did not know his biological father as his parents separated when he was around 2 years old. His mum had another relationship following this and Billy thought this man was his biological father until his mum told him about his father when he was around 14 or 15 years of age. His mum and partner had a child together – Billy's half sister. There appeared resentment in Billy's telling of this as he comments on there being inequity in how he saw his step father treated him, his older brother and his half-sister. His step-father was violent towards his mother for a number of years – but Billy thought this was just a normal way of being. His step-father kicked his brother out as soon as he turned 16 and he went to find his biological father, which he did. Billy was encouraged to have contact with him too, but he didn't really want any contact with him. His mother's relationship finally ended and she developed a new relationship. This was non-violent and Billy talks about this period positively. He went to a 'good' school but didn't try that hard as he wanted to enter the armed forces when he was old enough. However, he started stealing from his mother in order to buy things to fit in with the more well-off children at school. The stealing was uncovered and after an un-related argument with his mother's new partner, Billy was kicked out.

Billy's story goes on to describe a period of care by an ex-school teacher, army training and deployment, dishonourable discharge, coping with what could be seen as post-traumatic stress disorder, drug use, and burglary. His story ends with his attempts, at the time of the interview, to gain qualifications and work experience in order to obtain employment.

Although being thrown out of his family home was reported as the reason for becoming homeless, we can see a number

> **❝** *So I've been paying the rent, it's not been going to whoever. So it's been going to the probably the landlady then, because I know that she owed money to mortgage people. I never seen nobody like the landlord or nothing since I been in that property and then I got the letter, like an eviction letter. And then I came here.* **❞**

of emerging issues preceding this event. The presence of domestic violence in the home, towards his mother, clearly had a profound impact on his life and his outlook. Similarly, and seemingly with a degree of resentment, the discovery that the man he thought was his father was not, provided an added disequilibrium to an already precarious family environment. These two interconnected events appeared to lay the foundations for the subsequent confrontation with his parents over his stealing. The 'risk factor' here was the lack of harmony within the family but this appears far more complex than the presence of a step-parent and instances of domestic violence within the household.

Getting evicted by a landlord

Vicky, who was 33 years old and living in a hostel at the time we spoke to her, recounted the events leading up to her eviction from her home:

"Everything went fine, everything went fine… and then all of a sudden I got a letter saying the landlord, which I'd never seen, the family friend or something that came round for the rent money, because the council hadn't sorted it out back then, but I had to give money like each week. And then all of a sudden they've stopped coming round and then all of a sudden I had a letter saying it's been taken over because of the landlord owed them money for that mortgage, which I didn't know about and then, then I asked for some receipts,

some payments slips and receipts and they was paying it at the bank and then, and then. I didn't hear nothing until about three months on, about six, seven months on, being told that it's going to court, because they've had no payments and I've said because I normally, once I've got receipts, I chuck things away. So it's like they've had no proof and then it's gone to court to get repossessed. Paid it again, the rent and then phoned them up, because, I said "I've paid it. Have you received it?" They said nothing's come up. So I've been paying the rent, it's not been going to whoever. So it's been going to the probably the landlady then, because I know that she owed money to mortgage people. I never seen nobody like the landlord or nothing since I been in that property and then I got the letter, like an eviction letter. And then I came here." (Vicky, 33)

Vicky's story:

Vicky talked about having had an unhappy childhood as a result of being bullied at school, having few friends and being assaulted by her father numerous times. One assault was reported to one of her teachers and she was moved into care for around 3 months. After this, things seemed to settle down for her and she also moved to a new area when she was around 12 or 13 years of age. Vicky began a relationship with someone when she was 16, became pregnant and had the child at 17. Vicky had two subsequent children, with the same partner, when

she was 21 and 23 years old. However, after the birth of their first child Vicky was kicked out of their home by her partner and went to live in a women's refuge. She remained in the refuge for around 7-8 months. Vicky talks about how her partner talked her into going back, which is when she became pregnant again. They all moved into a private rented house, but after a while her partner started hitting her and then he left. She moved into a council house with her three children. During this time her partner was still coming and going, trying to get her back, but, when she needed to go into hospital for an operation, he was so unsupportive she decided to end the relationship (aged 30). She met someone else, who had relatives in Stoke, who found her a private rented property in Stoke. Unfortunately, the owner of the property got into arrears with their mortgage and the house was repossessed, leaving her homeless, so she ended up in one of the hostels in the city. Vicky talked about how she experiences mental health problems, suggests that there is evidence of physical damage from the assaults by her father and has had post-natal depression following the birth of her first child. She now experiences depression frequently, which makes working difficult.

From the reading of Vicky's biography it is clear that her life is not typical of someone who has become homeless as a result of not paying their bills. Although the statement, used by some in the homelessness sector, of 'it can happen to anyone' can be broadly accurate, in the case of Vicky her situation appears grounded in a tapestry of particular events, people and personal challenges. In her early years she experienced abuse and an unhappy school life, combined with a period of time in care and a movement away from the

> "However, it should be noted that at each step Vicky was apparently able to maintain secure and, apparently, independent accommodation for herself and her children whilst she managed and eventually overcame this abusive relationship. It then appears that she was finally made homeless by forces beyond her control...

place of her birth. Although a period of relative stability followed, this appeared to end as a result of a difficult and sometimes violent relationship with the father of her children, and the onset of mental health problems. However, it should be noted that at each step Vicky was apparently able to maintain secure and, apparently, independent accommodation for herself and her children whilst she managed and eventually overcame this abusive relationship. It then appears that she was finally made homeless by forces beyond her control as her landlord failed to keep up with their mortgage repayments – homelessness that may well have been related to the collapse of the housing market.

The ending of a relationship

Shaun, aged 24, was also living in a hostel at the time of the interview. He talked about how the ending of a relationship also meant the removal of secure accommodation:

> *"So I split up with her over fuck knows what the first time, mate, but you know. Split up with her, moved in with a mate. Fucking moved about again like. Stopping in a mate's house here, stopping on a sofa in someone else's house."* **(Shaun, 24)**

Shaun's story:

Shaun was born in the south of England. His father was in the navy and Shaun did not see him much when younger. Shaun remembers a degree of favouritism shown towards his brother, from his father, largely due to his brother's ability at football. Shaun indicated that the family was poor, but not overly so, and with the

exception of the poor relationship with his father indicates he was generally content as a child. However, his parents' marriage ended and his mother brought the children to the Stoke area, moving around a lot, until they settled in the same house for around 6 years when Shaun was 13 or 14 years old. At this time, Shaun had begun using marijuana. Shaun talks about an argument he had with his mother when he was 16 which instigated a move in with his girlfriend at the time who was 24 and had children from a previous relationship. Shaun, in this period, started using more marijuana and different drugs. However, this stopped once he realised he needed to sort himself out and look for a job. Shaun talks about getting 'poor sorts of jobs' and leaving them and over this period of time he left his previous girlfriend and went through a period of forming casual relationships sleeping at their homes and also sofa surfing at friends' houses. He started working on a farm where he learned lots of skills, but which led to an increase in the use of drink and drugs as a result of trying to relax on an evening and an increase in disposable income. This was seen as difficult work and not always reliable as it was cash in hand, which meant he left to find more secure employment. He found secure employment, but soon afterwards his relationship at the time ended, which meant he had to move away and he could not find accommodation close to his job and so he had to return to farm work. After this he obtained his own property with his partner at the time. They were expecting a child together and after a major argument Shaun was arrested and had to leave the house. He talks about how he now has restrictive visiting rights with his daughter, but that he continues to have a relationship with her despite this.

> **So I split up with her over fuck knows what the first time, mate, but you know. Split up with her, moved in with a mate. Fucking moved about again like. Stopping in a mate's house here, stopping on a sofa in someone else's house.**

Shaun's relationships with women appear grounded in what could be seen as immaturity and as ultimately serially precarious. However, far from being unaware of this, Shaun is open about this in the narration of the events in his life. Relationships are storied as unavoidable, and the way in which the failure of these is inevitably tied to his continual housing precarity is acknowledged. It is not clear how much his recreational drug and alcohol use have impacted on these relationships, but a reading of his account at face value brings to light a number of different threads to his homeless life: a great deal of mobility in his early life, which possibly hindered his ability to form meaningful relationships; ejection from his family home at an early age; drug and alcohol use; apparently hedonistic intimate relationships; and low-paid casual employment. These events and issues will also have their own interconnected impacts. The ending of the relationship immediately prior to ending up in the hostel was the ending of only one of many relationships he had experienced over the years. Shaun's homelessness, therefore, cannot simply be explained by reference to the ending of this particular relationship but only in more complex terms as related to (among other things) his history of material and probably emotional dependence on women.

Turning points in people's lives

A turning point is a point in the narrative of an individual at which the course of their life changes direction in a significant way. This point can be a particular event or something that happens to them, a traumatic experience (defined as an experience that overwhelms one's capacity to cope with everyday life), a complete change of routine, a change of heart or mind, or a change of fortunes (a stroke of good or bad luck). Some turning points can be described as positive, leading to clear improvements in an individual's life, while others are negative, resulting in real harm to the person concerned. In some cases, it is not clear whether they are positive or

Table 1: Types of turning point in a life history

Type of Turning Point	Sub-types
Getting head sorted	Became more responsible, grew up (Andy), got fed up with being a bum (Billy), just decided to (Fraser, Marcus), got bored of chaotic lifestyle (Gemma), decided to stay out of trouble (Jimmy, Chris)
Getting into education/training/job	Got a job/work (Billy, Christian, Fraser, Neil, Philip), got into education/training (Christian, Fraser, Vinnie)
Finding a new significant other	Finding a sexual partner (Ben, Stefan, Trent, Freddy), becoming a parent (Patrick, Vicky)
Moving into a hostel	Giving up alcohol (Colin), coming off drugs (Stefan), new life (Becka), volunteering opportunities (Derek), getting into college (Christian, Connor, Dawn, Ollie, Wendy, Andy, Rick, Trent)
Moving to Stoke	Getting into education (Ewan, Flynn), met dad (Becka), new start (Mandy)
Getting own place (Fraser, Ruth)	
Having a conversation with a key person	With sister (Flynn), with worker (Yasmin)
Getting help with a substance misuse problem	Alcohol (Gemma, Trent, David), heroin (Jack, Elliot, Leon, Sarah, Tony, Nigel)
Getting a substance misuse problem	Alcohol (Trent), heroin (Nigel)
Suffering a bereavement	Sexual partner (Hayden), mother (Jack, Sarah), father (Arran, Elliot, Scott), both parents (Wayne, Scott), child (Tina)
Suffering serious harm	Bullying by older boy (Todd), hit by a car (Evan), childhood accident (Scott)
Leaving a violent partner	Moved out (Gemma, Kate), divorced him (Hannah)
Being betrayed by a partner	With best friend (Jack), infidelity (Brian)
Leaving home	Parental home (Yasmin)
Violent step-father left home (Billy)	
Joining the army (Billy, Hayden)	
Leaving the army (Billy)	
Being sent to prison (Heath)	
Becoming reconciled with mother (Wendy)	
Recognising the need to repay karmic debt	Spiritual awakening (Eddie), atonement (Stefan)

negative, and can be both positive and negative. All turning points can be classified as involving either changes to the individual or changes to their environment; in some cases, the turning point represents a change to both the individual and their environment.

Analysis of the life stories of homeless people for this research revealed at least 20 kinds of self-reported turning point (see Table 1). Most types of turning point were positive but a significant minority were negative. Some life stories (e.g. Duncan, Kieran, Brian) contained no clear turning point of any kind, despite prompting by the interviewer, using the McAdams (1993) technique.

Positive / Negative	Change in self / others / circumstances/ relationships
All positive	Change in self
All positive	Mostly change in self, sometimes also due to chance events (circumstances)
All positive	Change in self
All positive	All change in self but some also involved change in circumstances (both together)
All positive	Mainly change in relationships and circumstances
All positive	Change in relationships (Fraser), change in self (Ruth)
All positive	Change in self
All positive	Change in self, often triggered by a crisis (collapse, health scare, death of fellow users)
All negative	Change in self
All negative except Elliot – led to detox	Change in self: mainly trauma, and often also in relationships with others
All negative	Loss of schooling (Todd, Scott), onset of drug use (Evan)
All positive	Change in relationship
All negative	Change in self, e.g. started drinking (Brian)
Negative – thrown out	Change in circumstances
Positive	Change in circumstances
Positive	Change in self
Negative	Change in self
Positive	Change in self
Positive	Change in others (i.e. mother)
Positive	Change in self

> **❝** *ended up going out one night getting stupidly drunk and off my head and ended up waking up in a police cell and got eight months. That's what made me want to change my life round...* **❞**

In the case of many, perhaps most, turning points, a number of changes were going on at more or less the same time, and it was often difficult to identify exactly how these changes were related to the self-reported turning point itself. For example, looking again at the biography of Billy, leaving the army was a turning point for him, but this leaving was precipitated by his traumatic experiences whilst on active service. So rather than saying that leaving the army changed him and placed him on what turned out to be a downward path, one could argue that his experiences within the army had already changed him, and his discharge and subsequent descent into hopelessness and homelessness were an outcome of those experiences. Leaving the army is clearly a change in circumstances but the key meaning of the turning point is the change that occurred in Billy himself.

Some of the turning points seem surprising and counter-intuitive. For example, prison as a positive turning point:

> *"ended up going out one night getting stupidly drunk and off my head and ended up waking up in a police cell and got eight months. That's what made me want to change my life round, to be honest with you, because when you sit in prison for eight months thinking, "What the fuck am I doing in here?", d'you know what I mean, "How have I got here?" I couldn't even tell, you know, how I got there, I don't know what happened. I had no choice but to go guilty. I couldn't argue with the story because I didn't know what went on. All's I know, I woke up, obviously the Police had given me a slap as well, God knows. I dunno."*
> *(Heath, 23)*

The difficulty in interpreting this story arises from the fact that Heath cannot remember what actually happened that led to him be in prison but the point is that, whatever happened, it forced him to review his life up to that time, and that was the shock he needed to turn his life around.

Similarly, with the idea that bereavement might have positive effects:

Elliot: "Dad died er, in March. He had a few brain tumours and he died on the 6th March and erm, I was holding his hand and I promised my him, I promised him I'd sort myself out and look after my Mum. And erm, then I started drinking then and er [name of partner] got pregnant at the end of June, well before then, but we didn't notice because we were both using and then erm, when it was confirmed [partner] went into the Heavy Management for detox and I had to do mine in the hostel which was the hardest thing I've ever done, you know doing a detox when I've got people knocking on my door asking me to sort for them?

Int: Sort them? With drugs?

Elliot: Yeah, sorting, so I had people knocking on me door and everything, asking me to score for them but I didn't. I didn't give in; I've been clean since June. I've had a couple of little mishaps along the way, I'd been drinking, was drinking quite heavily at one time, very depressed, lager, vodka, bottle of baileys, then I started attending [name of support group] and went down to two cans of Guinness a day. I'd have one in the morning and one at night, and that was basically everything. Then erm, I was in the [name of hostel] and got myself sorted out, got off the gear, still scripting, on the meth, 20ml of meth and me sleeping tablets and then I came and looked at this place. And erm, I accepted this and moved in straight away. And that's the best bit." *(Elliot, 37)*

It can be seen from this extract that the relation between Elliot's Dad's death and his subsequent coming off heroin and getting his own place is complicated. There are 'mishaps along the way' - his excessive drinking, his depression, his girlfriend's pregnancy, and so on. But he remains true to his promise to his father, so overall the effect of the bereavement is positive.
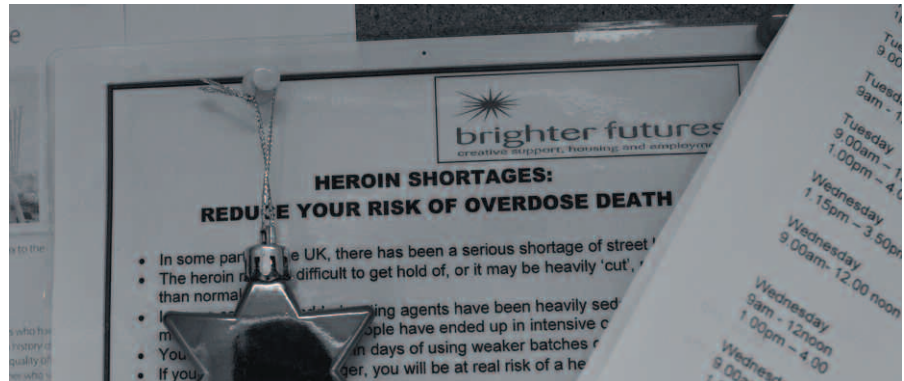
Crisis points?

In a few cases, the point identified was more accurately described as a 'crisis point' (Ravenhill, 2008), which was a 'fork in the road' or a point at which the direction of the narrative could change radically but had not yet done so. Strictly speaking, such a crisis point occurs before a turning point – or one could say that a 'turning' occurs in response to a crisis. For this reason, a turning point can be understood also as a point of no return – whatever direction is chosen at this point, there can be no turning back, as the course of action that follows cannot be reversed.

To illustrate the significance of crisis points, here are three stories from our research:

Nigel's story:

"So I was in prison, I was 30 and it was Christmas, the year 2000. I was approaching 30 and it hit me for six. I thought, "Bloody hell, 30 years of age, stuck in jail. I've got nothing to my name." I didn't. I didn't have nothing to go to on release. All I'd done was take heroin. As far as all my gold, all my money - I hadn't got any gold, I hadn't got any money, nothing. I didn't have my driving licence no more. I'd got nothing. So then I sort of started thinking in a dark sort of way. I thought, "Fuck it.

What have I got to lose? Might as well pick up a gun and go for it and be someone you've met on the way just briefly, or be someone who you've met in a book." D'you know what I mean? **(Nigel, 40)**

Ruth's story:

"A couple of weeks before my birthday I'm going down to the groups, you know, getting my samples on and off. Once I scored I was feeling like shit 'cos my contact had been cancelled. Having a load of gear in. I was like, I've had enough. Sorted all my shit out, went in the bathroom. Wrote a letter. The lot. You know, goodbye world. To my kids, "You're better off without me. Go and have a future 'cos I'm always letting you down. At least now I'm gone you can move forwards without me. It's not you. I love you that much I'm leaving you so I don't put anymore shit on you." You know, one of those types of things. Anyway, I gets about 15mil into the thing and I looked up into the mirror and I could see like my youngest son waving to me and he's crying saying, "Don't leave me." I'm like, "What the?" Anyway, I took the pin out my arm and I launched it across the room. It was full and I just fucking launched it. Was like, "What the fuck am I doing?" and just launched it. I've not touched it since." **(Ruth, 42)**

> **“** *Wrote a letter. The lot. You know, goodbye world. To my kids, "You're better off without me. Go and have a future 'cos I'm always letting you down. At least now I'm gone you can move forwards without me. It's not you. I love you that much I'm leaving you so I don't put anymore shit on you.* **”**
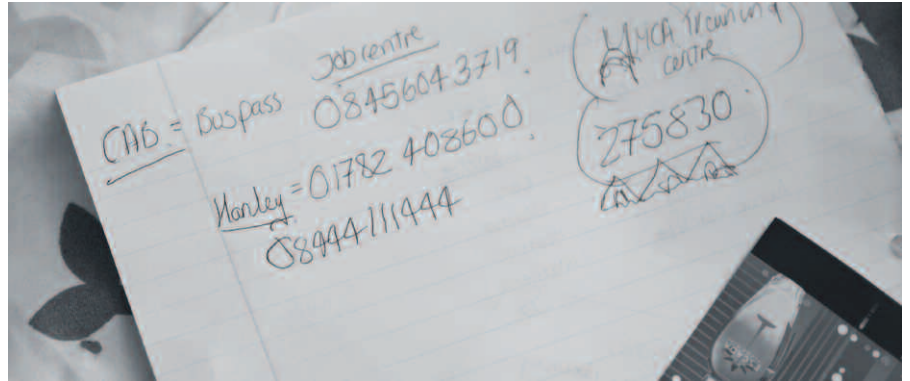
Yasmin's story:

"Didn't know who my dad was, well, I still thought Dave was my dad. My mate tried to set me up with him and my mate turned round and told my auntie, "That's my mate I'm going to set him up with." I heard my mum and auntie talking and saying "We're going to have to sit her down and tell her." and I walked in. "Tell me what?" They goes "You can't date him." I'm like "I didn't want to anyway, it's just my mate tried to set me up." I goes "Anyway, why?" They goes "He's your brother." I'm like "I haven't got no brothers. Got no sisters, got no brothers." Then they said "Yeah, you've got a brother called Darren, a brother called Dean and a sister called Diane." (Yasmin, 23)

What these stories have in common is that the path of the narrative could have gone in either of two opposite directions – to the dark or to the light. Nigel and Ruth both experienced what could be described as moral or existential crises, crises of choice about the conduct of their lives, and they both chose light and life rather than darkness and death. In both cases, the resulting turning point was a change in their self. For Yasmin, however, the change that she experienced was in her circumstances and in her relationships with those who were nearest and dearest to her. This could be described as an ontological crisis: the world of her family was not at all as she had imagined it to be. The implications of this for her future life are not entirely clear – perhaps neither positive nor negative, or perhaps both positive and negative. We can be sure, however, that her life will never be the same again.

In summary

The brief analysis presented here aims to illustrate the complex array of issues, events and, most importantly, the meaning such things hold for the central characters. Although we, as individuals, should be experts on our own lives we are often completely unable to identify the reasons why things happen to us. By looking at the occurrences of issues in a person's life it is possible to see the emergence of 'trigger' events and the compounding effect that each subsequent trigger event can have (what Ravenhill, 2008: 101, has called 'an accumulation of triggers'). Similarly, providing the scope for people to explore those instances where they have reached a

'turning point' offers them reflective space to identify the tone of their life story, thus allowing them to begin a process of re-storying their possible and imagined futures.

This chapter has demonstrated that to identify events as causes of homelessness would be missing the point of understanding why homelessness occurs. Such understanding requires a focus, not so much on the events themselves, but on how individuals experience them and how they respond to and reflect upon them. Much of an individual's response is shaped by how they have developed the psychological means to negotiate their life when growing up or, as we will see later, when supported by others later in life.

4 It's who you know: networks and relationships

Other people play an enormous role in the lives of everyone, including homeless people. These others include, in particular, parents, step-parents, siblings, extended family members and friends. They are typically central characters in individuals' routes into and out of homelessness. This chapter illustrates just one aspect of their role, namely social networks.

Previous research (Johnson and Chamberlain 2008) has suggested that social networks are detrimental to the well-being of young homeless people. Our research, however, tells a different story, with new social networks consisting of homeless peers sometimes playing a vital role in alleviating the problems associated with homelessness.

Understanding the role of social networks for homeless people

An early account of social networks concentrated on how they are formed and ended in homelessness pathways (Grigsby et al. 1990). This account suggested that a person's social networks are weakened by disruptive life events and, consequently, they find it difficult to access the information and resources they need to avoid becoming homeless. However, once they are homeless they meet other homeless people who help them adapt to their new situation. Although, in some respects, this may be helpful for them, such as in providing protection and a sense of community, the account suggests it may also encourage deeper entrenchment in homelessness.

Several other writers provide a similar account. Most recently, Johnson and Chamberlain (2008) have proposed the 'social adaptation hypothesis'. Their account contains four propositions:

1) Once people become homeless, a sense of community, often previously missing in their lives, is achieved through affiliation with other homeless people

2) They become involved in a homeless subculture in hostel accommodation

3) They learn strategies from other homeless people that help them to survive homelessness (but which also undermine their attempts to obtain permanent accommodation)

4) The longer they are homeless, the more likely they are to sleep rough.

This account, however, presents people as victims of events beyond their control and their subsequent actions as their attempts to survive in severely challenging circumstances. A contrasting account of the role of social networks in homelessness pathways is offered by Hyde (2005). She does not view individuals as passive; instead, they are actively making decisions about how they can address the problems they face. For example, if their family is not supportive and nurturing, they may sever their ties with them. Maintaining their independence is of crucial importance for these individuals.

The findings of our study reflect, to some extent, the account offered by Hyde. Whereas she stressed that families could be the antagonists for an individual, the stories generated in our research show that friendships can be perceived in a similar way. They do not, as Johnson and Chamberlain suggest, necessarily encourage a deepening entrenchment into a homeless way of life (although this does appear to occur in some cases). Severing ties with friends (of a negative influence) can be the expression of an individual's desire to solve the problems associated with those networks, such as substance misuse or criminal activity. In doing so, however, the individual may lose the accommodation they share with those friends, and thus their homelessness begins. On the other hand, new social networks in hostels, we have found, can later be harnessed to achieve an 'exit route' from homelessness.

The findings presented here discuss a range of roles that social networks played in the life stories of our participants. Dominant themes indicated the different roles of friendships at various points in their lives. One of the strongest themes was an episode of affiliation, most notably while the individual was still in school (and often narrated as 'the wrong crowd'). Another strong theme indicated a process of disaffiliation from these networks and would, in some cases, precede the beginning of a homelessness episode. Finally, another notable feature of the role of social networks in these life stories was a period of new affiliations with other homeless people and people with similar experiences to their own.

" I met new people here [the hostel] as well which are decent people as well. Well, they are compared to the people I used to hang around with. It's helped me out. "
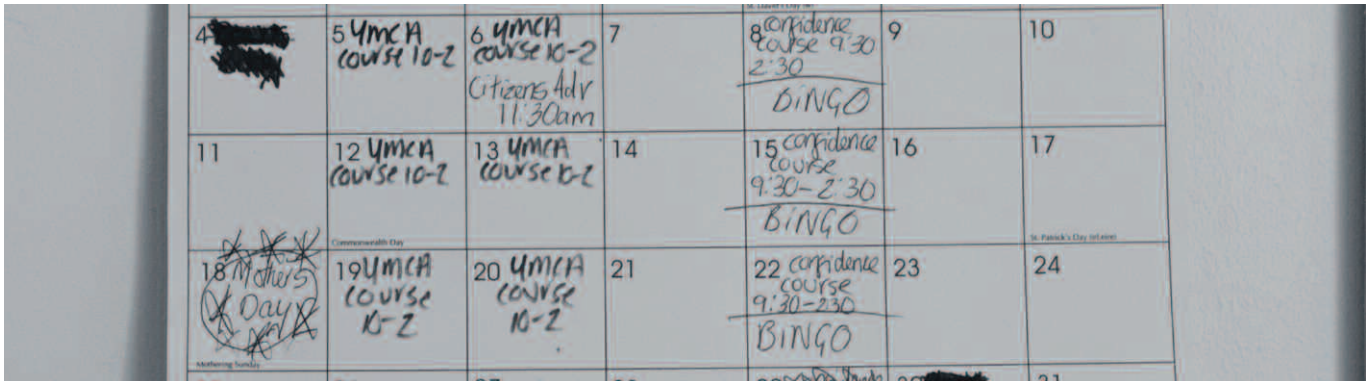
Making friends in adolescence

Social networks featured heavily in participants' recollections of their school/teenage years. A common thread was around being an impressionable person who was led astray by the 'wrong crowd'. In most cases the wrong crowd was engaged in behaviours such as substance misuse, committing crime, and being absent from school. Members of the 'wrong crowd' were often people who were older than them:

"I started the senior school. In the first year I'd say I was basically some kind of follower. I was hanging around with lads who were basically like in the end of the years and older than me so I was basically trying to be accepted by people older than me and that kind of led me into a wrong way of life and that's what I'm trying to tell you now. So what happened in the first year, I went to school, I started smoking cigarettes, as you do at the young age and the older people I was hanging around with were smoking cannabis and things like that and that's how it started, my life." (Ben, 30)

Social networks form for all kinds of reasons. Most commonly, people were seen as joining a 'wrong crowd' in order to enhance their self image in some way or to 'fit in'. Regardless of the reason, those who joined felt it was important to be liked and respected by their peers. Respect was often gained by following and copying the behaviour of others, as Trent describes:

"I was doing what everybody else was doing. Taking drugs, drinking. It wasn't my decision, I was just following everybody else, like everyone does follow everyone else. Like when you're young, you have a fag because you think

that you're big. Your mate has a fag because he thinks that he's big, d'you know what I mean? Then you just get addicted to it very easily." (Trent, 17)

Another story, this time from Andy, highlights the difficulties he had both at home and at school, which preceded the formation of his social network. Andy talked about the disruption he experienced when his parents' relationship broke down and a step-father arrived within the household. Andy was also diagnosed with dyslexia in school and he attributed his challenging behaviour to a desire to avoid difficult situations in classrooms, such as being asked to read. He became involved in criminal activity with friends while still at school, and for which he now feels fortunate to have avoided punishment:

"I was burgling houses and robbing cars with my mate. He's in jail as well, like. I've got a few of my mates in jail. I was lucky, like. I never got caught for as much as what I did because if I did I'd probably be in jail." (Andy, 18)

The activities that people talked about engaging in as part of the wrong crowd, though, were not sustainable, particularly as they became older and more reliant upon themselves to take care of their own needs. This would, for the vast majority of people we spoke to, inevitably lead to their disengagement from the 'wrong crowd'.

Jimmy: "I didn't really want to leave the group, but I had to before things got worse."
Int: "Why? Were you still under 16 and this time?"
Jimmy: "I was at bars, my drinking was increasing. I had a lot, drug use was increasing. I started taking pills and it got to the point where I was smoking weed every day." (Jimmy, 20)

The breakdown of friendships

Social networks also emerged strongly in participants' stories about their life after they left school. At this stage, the demands of friendships and the risks associated with their maintenance tended to conflict with what they described as their individual needs and aspirations. This conflict was sometimes identified as the catalyst for a change in their circumstances and a 'realisation' that their lifestyle had been damaging for them. For example, Trent understood that his role in his friendships was nothing more than to provide them with money, alcohol, and drugs:

"They just let me stop because I had money like. I was giving them drugs, beer, know what I mean? So they'd let me stop and then I started getting low and low on drugs like, they were like didn't want to know me… so my mates were just using me. At the end of it all, just using me… then I realised: I had nowhere to go. Just walking round the streets at six o'clock in the morning thinking what I was gonna do. Then moved in here [the hostel]."
(Trent, 17)

Substance misuse was also common in Andy's social networks but, for him, a desire to improve his physical health encouraged him to move away from those peers:

"I don't want them as my mates. I want people who are fucking decent... I just like looking after my body like. I've got away from my mates like, I'm here [the hostel]. I'm not with them so I'm not smoking weed and drinking. I'm looking after my body and being fit and I like it."
(Andy, 18)

When moving away from perceived negative relationships, participants often reflected on the choices they made regarding their social networks and the outcomes of those choices. Several talked about disengaging from a group of friends, or realised that others were not really interested in their welfare. In Trent's case, there was a clear pathway from disengagement with friends to becoming homeless and entering the hostel. In hostels, there are opportunities to develop new networks with people in similar circumstances.

> *Everyone jumps to conclusions and thinks it's full of smackheads and just full of horrible people but it's just full of teenagers like me, really, who just got nowhere to go, [so] go there.*

Making new friends

As Chapter 5 will discuss in more depth, hostels can often be seen as a time of renewal in the lives of residents and a chance to establish new goals. The problems that had arisen around the time of disaffiliation from expired friendships, such as substance misuse, were often – in many cases – starting to be dealt with. In most cases, once they had settled in, residents got on well with one another, made new friends, and formed new relationships in the hostel, and in many cases their health and wellbeing improved.

A fairly consistent story was told by respondents about the nature of their co-residents in hostels. This was summed up by Jenny:

"Everyone jumps to conclusions and thinks it's full of smackheads and just full of horrible people but it's just full of teenagers like me, really, who just got nowhere to go, [so] go there." *(Jenny,18)*

This is not to say, however, that they did not have some bad experiences. For example, Ollie's story:

"I've seen people go over on heroin. I've seen people die. I've seen people have heart attacks in there. Basically, I've just seen a lot, a lot of things. I've seen people get beat up. I've seen people get broken into, getting stuff nicked off them. Basically, I've seen a lot in hostels in my life. I've seen things in all the hostels I've lived in." *(Ollie, 26)*

> *I've been looking for work pretty much every day, ringing up agencies. Like I said, I get loads of exercise all the time. I'm always in the gym and everything. Plus I met new people here [the hostel] as well which are decent people as well. Well, they are compared to the people I used to hang around with. It's helped me out.*

However, by far the majority of respondents talked about their co-residents and new social networks they were developing as being comprised of 'decent' people who can help them realise their goals. As Rick says:

"I've been looking for work pretty much every day, ringing up agencies. Like I said, I get loads of exercise all the time. I'm always in the gym and everything. Plus I met new people here [the hostel] as well which are decent people as well. Well, they are compared to the people I used to hang around with. It's helped me out." (Rick, 20)

There was often a sense that hostels provided people with an opportunity to meet people like themselves. This sense of sharedness of life experience was often narrated as crucial in order to move forward with their lives. For Carly, one specific relationship was cited as a specific catalyst for change:

"I met Lee and he's changed me. I stopped drinking and that, don't go out. I used go out like five times a week… I was going off the rails… I knew Lee anyway, but me and him started to get to know each other more and everything and, I don't know, just stopped, just got my act in gear and started going for job interviews and everything and now I've actually got a job." (Carly, 19)

The conflict that was characteristic of earlier friendships had been replaced by the harmony of new relationships.

In summary

The findings on social networks for homeless people in this research have revealed greater diversity than suggested by much previous research, which focused mainly on the detrimental aspects of homeless peers for people experiencing homelessness (but note important exceptions, e.g. Ravenhill, 2008; Gowan, 2010). Our research has shown that networks play both positive and negative roles during the life course. Significant peer relationships are developed in adolescence but these relationships often do not last. For young adults, some friendships break down if they do not complement the other goals a person may have for themselves, such as a desire to live independently and more responsibly. In some cases, the breakdown of a relationship can even trigger an episode of homelessness, for example where housing is a condition of the friendship. For some young people, once they move into hostel accommodation, it becomes possible for new relationships to develop that better reflect their aspirations.

These findings suggest a need for greater awareness and understanding of the complexity of social networks before and during episodes of homelessness. Becoming homeless does not necessarily mean that an individual is at any greater risk of remaining homeless simply as a consequence of meeting other homeless people. Many people have already experienced membership of social networks that have been detrimental to their wellbeing, they have identified them as problematic, and have decided to take action to remove themselves from them. Hostel accommodation is often perceived as a time to start again and learn from the mistakes of the past. While those who experience homelessness all have their individual histories, the professionals who work with them can encourage them to reflect upon the roles that different peers have played in their lives, what needs they want their friends to meet in the present and future, and how people with experience of homelessness may help others in a similar situation.

5 The hostel experience

There are many forms of specialised support available to people who need it within Stoke-on-Trent varying from substance misuse support services, mental health support services to the provision of supported accommodation. Each one of these services has a particular role to play and a corresponding impact on the lives of those people who use them. This chapter considers one of the main services used by those people we spoke to, namely hostels.

A wide range of literature documents the contribution that hostels and other forms of temporary accommodation make to enabling homeless people to make the transition from 'street life' to settled forms of residence (typically, a self-contained flat). The role of hostels, however, continues to be controversial. Evidence from homeless people themselves reveals a certain degree of ambivalence, and this ambivalence is reflected among researchers and practitioners.

Current thinking around hostels

There appear to be three overlapping lines of debate about hostels, which each reflect differences of opinion concerning the primary purpose of services to homeless people, what services should be provided and how they should be provided, respectively. The first is between those who advocate hostels primarily as a means to 'shelter' people for the night, to prevent them from sleeping outside, and those who believe that hostels should be used mainly as a stepping-stone towards more settled accommodation. The second is between those who argue that hostels should provide housing services primarily and those who consider it most important to provide a wide range of services within the hostel, particularly relating to reducing substance misuse, accessing training and employment, and meeting physical and mental health needs. The third is between those who believe in a more open, accepting and unconditional approach to dealing with homeless people and those who are convinced that a 'tougher', more coercive regime is required if homelessness is to be ended.

Research on hostels, as on homelessness services generally, does not indicate any clear way of resolving these debates. Indeed, it could be argued that the debates largely miss the point, which is that different homeless people have different needs, and will therefore judge hostels differently, accordingly to how well or badly they meet those needs. The important thing, then, is for hostels, and homelessness services generally, to focus on the needs of the individual homeless person and to tailor their services, as far as possible, to meet those needs. This, however, seems to be an area where the performance of hostels has varied enormously. Under the previous Labour government's Homelessness Action Programme in 1999, for example, hostels were expected, in return for government funding, to accommodate and resettle people with high support needs. Since these people are precisely the most difficult to resettle, the result was a 'silting up' (Cloke et al, 2010: 163) and what looked like a poor performance in resettlement.

Accessing hostels in Stoke-on-Trent

The people we spoke to reported experiences of hostels with widely varying characteristics, not only in Stoke but in many other areas of England. The nature of these forms of provision appeared to be extremely variable, in terms of quality of accommodation, characteristics of residents and of staff, rules and regulations, and quality of practical and emotional support.

People came to know about, and be introduced to, hostels in a variety of ways: from relatives, friends, Citizens' Advice Bureaux, the Council, the Rough Sleepers Team, the police, and other homeless people. In general, considering the difficult circumstances that were frequently associated with their homelessness (particularly drug and alcohol misuse, domestic violence, and problematic relationships), hostels seemed to offer the accommodation and support that they needed. For example, from David's story:

It's better than being on the streets. You get fed, the rooms are nice. Anybody who criticises it, spend a couple of nights on the streets. You'll soon change your mind. Yeah, I like the hostel here. Nice warm bed, you've got a roof over your head, you get fed. You've got a telly to watch, you can go out when you want, do shopping.

Int: *"So how did you come in contact with the Rough Sleepers Team?"*
David: *"It was someone from the Salvation Army said "Why don't you phone Rough Sleepers Team up?""*
Int: *"Right, they gave you the number?"*
David: *"Yeah. That's it. I went to the phone box, 'cos it's a free number. So I phoned Rough Sleepers and they said, "We'll come out to see you tomorrow morning." which is Saturday morning, no Friday morning and they said, "We can't do anything for you over the weekend 'cos nobody's working." They asked me if I'll be alright till Monday. I said yeah and they come out to me on the Monday morning, but I was drunk 'cos I had a bottle of cider with me. I wasn't drunk when they first came out to me. They gave me a cup of tea and that and said, "Give us an hour and we'll be back out to you." but by the time that hour had passed I'd drank the cider and I was drunk again from the night before. [Names of the support workers] brought me here to [name of hostel]. They told me to walk around for an hour 'cos I was drunk. By the time I got in here, I had to do all the paperwork. They're good people. They helped me. If it wasn't for them I'd still be out on the streets. I'd be dead by now. I've had lads kicking me."* **(David, 33)**

David had already been evicted twice from the Salvation Army hostel for drinking, but this story shows how he was still able to access suitable accommodation in the city.

Respondent views on hostels seemed to depend mainly on three factors: the quality of the accommodation itself, the quality of the services provided by the staff, and the quality of respondents' interaction with other residents. Respondents particularly appreciated having a room of a decent size, which they did not have to share with anyone else, and they were critical of hostels that were dirty, shabby or with poor furnishings.

The general view was expressed by David when he was asked about how he found hostel life:

"It's better than being on the streets. You get fed, the rooms are nice. Anybody who criticises it, spend a couple of nights on the streets. You'll soon change your mind. Yeah, I like the hostel here. Nice warm bed, you've got a roof over your head, you get fed. You've got a telly to watch, you can go out when you want, do shopping." **(David, 33)**

" *They're good people. They helped me. If it wasn't for them I'd still be out on the streets. I'd be dead by now. I've had lads kicking me.* **"**

Only one respondent (John, 57) stated that he was "more happy on the streets than in hostels", and that was because he valued the freedom of public spaces and compared this unfavourably with the edginess and 'wariness' that he associated with living in a hostel.

Views on hostel staff and structure

Those who had lived in many hostels were able to compare the treatment they received from different ones. For example, Eddie reported about a friend of his:

"He's been sleeping rough in one of them alleyways, you know straight across from here, and he's been sleeping rough in there for a few nights here and there, and being on the street every night, stopping in Hanley Park, isn't the safest place, and like he's been ringing up all these organisations and they've gone 'Well we can't do nothing, mate.' He's young, vulnerable, d'you know what I mean? I just think sometimes they don't pull their finger out 100%, but I mean I'm not knocking all of them because some of them are really excellent like, sort you out quick, but it's just some of them say they're a charity, but they probably say 'The budget's stretched. We can only do so much.' D'you know what I mean? That's my main qualms with them like." **(Eddie, 23)**

This theme of some hostels and staff 'going the extra mile', while others seemed to be overly concerned with money and their own salaries and careers, recurred in the stories of many respondents (see also Somerville et al, 2011). Several respondents questioned the motives of hostel staff, e.g. 'Is it a charity or is it a money-making mission?' (Wayne, 55), seeing them as uncommitted to their jobs (Hayden, 30) or 'All these guys care about is money. All the [name of hostel] care about is money. The people, it's a job to them, which is ridiculous to me because I don't appreciate that at all. They need to get off their arses and do their jobs properly' (Fraser, 23). Yet a resident of the same hostel said, of their experience of the service:

'It's fabulous. It is an eleventh hour, especially for a lot of these guys as well. It's an absolute godsend and the staff

are fantastic as well. I mean they have a lot to deal with, as there's quite a different range of people who come in here, quite a different degree of problems, but they are superb." *(Ian, 42)*

The only serious complaint made by any respondent was by Hayden, who claimed that he received no real support when he was feeling suicidal after the death of his girlfriend.

Most respondents were very positive about the help they received from hostel staff – one hostel in particular was highly praised by Kate and others:

"I love it here. I never want to go from here 'cos the staff are so nice and they're like my parents. They're like someone who's given me the attention that I've never had and they've, like, got all the girls that live in here and I'm friends with all of them. So yeah, I like it." *(Kate, 19)*

Many respondents, however, commented unfavourably on the rules that hostels imposed, particularly concerning restricted opening times (the doors of one hostel were closed at 7pm), banning of alcohol from the premises, requirements for more or less continuous occupation (minimum of 5 nights out of 7) or, in one case, the opposite (maximum of 3 nights out of 7), and restrictions or outright prohibition on having partners or others staying with them in their rooms. Most of them seemed to understand the reasons for such rules but felt that more flexibility was needed, to allow for individual circumstances (not necessarily their own). Hayden also didn't agree with evicting people just because they have had too much to drink. Several respondents (at least nine) reported being evicted from hostels, not only for drinking, but for rent arrears, fighting with other residents, being offensive to staff and other residents, and having a partner living in their room.

On the other hand, some residents greatly appreciated the use of discretion in enforcing the rules, to take account of individual circumstances. In the case of Colin, such use of discretion seemed to be life-changing:

'They sorted me out here. Gives you a bit of calmness. Makes you think you're better than that and I am. The staff, they change you in here. They know I have a drink, but like I say, one a few cans. If I come back at night they always say, "How much you had?" "Two cans." "Fair enough. Come in." 'cos they can tell when I've had a drink. Like I say, they've got a camera. Can see you walking the street. They say, "Go walk round for an hour." Where do I go? The off licence is round the corner.'
(Colin, 64)

Respondents generally appreciated the benefits provided to them by the hostel and its staff – for example, meeting and befriending people who had similar experiences to themselves, opportunities for voluntary work, accessing practical support and activities, and so on. They were grateful that hostel staff were working hard to prepare them for resettlement – for example, with housing application

> *I love it here. I never want to go from here 'cos the staff are so nice and they're like my parents. They're like someone who's given me the attention that I've never had and they've, like, got all the girls that live in here and I'm friends with all of them. So yeah, I like it.*

forms, access to employment and training and counselling, volunteering opportunities, sporting and social activities, and so on.

Others emphasised the importance of taking responsibility for one's own life, rather than just relying on others. For example, Ewan:

"you can't just rely on your support worker to get you a house if you're not committed. You've got to show progression and you've got to be committed and show that you are capable of doing these responsible activities that life has to hold for you. Don't just take two days to get your own house. It takes a period of time. It's really on how much you are committed to achieving what you want to achieve. I don't know what else to say, but it's really about how committed you are to being how successful you wanna be. If no one wants to help themselves they ain't gonna get very far, are they." (Ewan, 20)

Drug and alcohol use in hostels

Several respondents reported extensive use of drugs and alcohol in hostels. The problem here is that people may form drug habits as a result of needing to fit in (this is comparable to the experience of prison) – what Zak (21) called 'the wrong kind of friends'. Nigel's experience was not untypical (and for heroin one could substitute amphetamines, ecstasy, cannabis, strong lager, cider, etc):

"I was living in [hostel] and I think everyone in there was on the gear, the heroin, and it wasn't long before I started going down the same path, because I felt sort of out of place. No one would talk to me until I started using and

> " *I'd love to call this place home, but I know it's only a temporary thing. I suppose in a way yeah, 'cos until I get somewhere where I can do it up myself. You can't change anything. I mean it's a gorgeous room what I've got, but it isn't mine and I know there's people who've been in there before me.* "

you were part of the people then, you were part of them. Otherwise, I think that they thought I was some kind of drugs police, five-oh, someone who's been put in there, a plant." (Nigel, 40)

Philip refused to move into one hostel because of the widespread use of heroin:

"Then they said, "You'll have to go to the [hostel], 'cos there's nowhere else for you." So I went down. Took one look at the place and. You walked in through the doors and there's this long corridor and at the end there's this room, recreation room with sofas and a telly and all that. There was maybe half a dozen people in there and every single one of these half dozen people was gouching. You know, gouching from heroin... Eyes closed, head down. You know, like that and basically wrecked off their heads. I said, "There's no way I'm stopping here." and I walked out." (Philip, 33)

Going back to chapter 4, this shows how social networks among hostel residents can be negative as well as positive – in some cases, the respondents appeared to move from one wrong crowd to another.

Intergenerational issues in hostels

One respondent (Vinnie, 23) felt that younger residents were given preferential treatment when it came to provision of move-on accommodation on the grounds that they were less responsible for their homelessness. Other respondents (Hayden and Eddie), however, felt that the residents were treated like kids 'and then when they [the younger ones] move out they don't keep their places and then they're straight back in here."
(Hayden, 30)

Older residents (that is, over 21) tended to be critical of the younger ones, while also, in some cases (e.g. Perry (50), who could 'see both sides'), recognising that they had acted similarly when they were their age. For example, Zak's story:

"The Sally Army, I preferred being there than I did here sometimes because this place is full of children. They run around, they're childish, pathetic, stupid little things going on. I like being at the Sally Army because it's just men, they're old, it's quiet there because there's nobody pissing about." (Zak, 21)

On the other hand, there was a perception that older residents can sometimes manipulate more 'naëve' younger residents.

An interesting – and possibly effective - practice in some hostels was the use of established residents to help new residents settle in. This was perceived as a good way to meet people within the hostel as well as easing the fears of new residents upon moving in.

Reflecting on life in a hostel

In terms of their general perceptions and feelings about living in a hostel, some respondents (e.g. Christian, 16; Todd, 28) confessed to being a bit down, not because of what the hostel was like, but because of their depressing situation. For example, Todd:

Todd: "That's what gets me down. I'm a bit down in this place like. I just wanna get out of here. It's doing my head in. just makes me feel dead low here."
Int: "What don't you like about being here?"
Todd: "Just because, you know, I should be out there having a job, having a decent place to live. I mean it's alright here, don't get me wrong. It just gets me down the

> *"Where you from?" "Newcastle." and they said, "Where d'you live, like?" and I said, "YMCA." they start laughing at me. It's not nice. It makes you look small, d'you know what I mean. That's why I don't tell people where I live...*

fact that I am in here, in a hostel you know. I can't do nothing. I can't work, I've got no money to myself or nothing. It's just like you get paid, you pay your service charge and that's it, you've got no money. That's it, so you're always depressed all the time. Sometimes I just hide out in my room." (Todd, 28)

In contrast, others saw the hostel as their home, even though only a temporary home, and valued the support the hostel provided more highly than what they had received from their parents. For example, Ollie:

"The staff like help me, take me places, appointments and that. My dad wouldn't do that. So I think this is my lifestyle, because I get support off the staff. I don't get support off my family. I think this is my family now, this I my home. I think this is my home. That's the way my head works. I think the [hostel] is my home, but obviously it's not, but obviously it is for the time being till I get somewhere, but that's why I moved back in here, 'cos they give me support my dad doesn't, what I need. I don't need a lot of support. I don't need be watched 24/7. I just need people to help me and do things with me, like my parents never did." (Ollie, 26)

Alina (31) saw the situation very clearly:

"I'd love to call this place home, but I know it's only a temporary thing. I suppose in a way yeah, 'cos until I get somewhere where I can do it up myself. You can't change anything. I mean it's a gorgeous room what I've got, but it isn't mine and I know there's people who've been in there before me, I know there's gonna be people in there after me. I mean this isn't the end for me. I am going for supported housing, which is similar to this, but there's no staff."

On the other hand, some respondents felt embarrassed or ashamed or otherwise stigmatised for living in a hostel. For example, Trent:

Trent: I'm ashamed of being in here.
Int: Are you?
Trent: Yeah, I am. I don't like telling people where I live because it makes you feel like. The last time I told someone, they said, "Where you from?" "Newcastle." and they said, "Where d'you live, like?" and I said, "YMCA." they start laughing at me. It's not nice. It makes you look small, d'you know what I mean. That's why I don't tell people where I live, 'cos I don't like it, it's not nice."
(Trent, 17)

ome respondents, particularly in women's refuges, the security provided by the hostel meant that some people talked about being afraid of leaving. For example, Violet:

"I've got stability. My son is actually in nursery now. I'm doing different courses. There's a lot of things that's helped me in here. I'm just a bit worried now about when I leave and get a house. I feel a bit scared, just 'cos I feel I might have the panic attacks again 'cos I'm alone, which is one thing, one negative thing that I'm scared of leaving, 'cos I'll be on my own." *(Violet, 23)*

In summary

The overall picture painted by the people we spoke to around hostels in the city was mixed, but largely positive. There were some negative features, many of which are well documented and known to service providers. There was, though, an encouraging level of positive reflection on hostels and the impact they had had, directly and indirectly, on local people. Several respondents confirmed that, since being in a hostel, they had significantly reduced their drinking, drug-taking and offending behaviour, and had become more positive in their outlook on life. Often, however, the help required was more a matter of establishing purposeful daily routines.

Jack provided an eloquent description of two kinds of hostel staff:

"a lot of people that come in this job, they don't do it because they care, they don't really give a shit... Like they should have more ex-users working in situations like drug rehabilitation centres, because they've got the first-hand knowledge, know what I mean, or people who are at least caring people, who actually care about the residents, because occasionally you do get members of staff who are just there for the money basically. They're there because they like having the power basically, like a little Hitler, but, yeah basically just better screening of

who you have, because it is the staff that make it, basically. It is. When you get a good member of staff, when you get a good support worker, then that's when you'll go places, because they'll challenge you to find the answers in yourself. They won't just give you the answers. They'll lead you to the conclusions so you've brought yourself to the conclusions, do you know what I mean. They'll actually, they will, they'll change you as a person, they'll improve you as a person, whereas other ones won't. They'll just tick boxes, basically, they'll just tick boxes." *(Jack, 29)*

No doubt reflecting, at least in part, the achievements of governmental programmes in improving the quality of hostel provision in England (see Chapter 1), more recent research such as the FOR-HOME study (Crane et al, 2011), relating to London and Nottinghamshire/Yorkshire, strongly suggests that hostels have improved considerably, particularly in their capacity to prepare residents for resettlement. Our own research is consistent with these findings, in that it reveals a more ambiguous and more complex picture of hostels today than the rather dismal one reported by Cloke et al (2010) (on the basis of research conducted in 2001/2) (see also discussion in Somerville et al, 2011).

6 Putting Stoke-on-Trent in its place

One of the themes we wanted to explore in our analysis was the influence that the place of Stoke-on-Trent had on the lives of the people we spoke to. A strong theme underpinning this project was that, although Stoke-on-Trent represented a suitable area for a case study for multiple exclusion homelessness, there was something 'different' about the place. This theme came over strongly in the discussions both with the project advisory group and with a wider range of service providers in the area. As such we intended to explore how far the place permeated the narratives of homelessness and exclusion that we had generated. Research into homelessness has often looked at how the place where homelessness occurs influences and impacts on the prevalence of homelessness and its experience. Similarly, in our analysis, we were keen to explore the complexity of homelessness with respect to movement from place to place, and how this shapes the wider experience of homelessness.

Reflecting on life in Stoke-on-Trent

What was particularly striking from our analysis was that, in contrast to the service providers, the 'uniqueness' of Stoke-on-Trent was rarely narrated in the discussions with respondents. Moreover, the majority of people did not comment or frame their stories in respect of the socio-economic circumstances of the city. However, for a minority of people, Stoke-on-Trent was important and aspects of this context did permeate their biographies.

The people who perceived Stoke in a positive light tended, more often than not, to originate from other towns and cities in the UK. Some of these people had come to Stoke as a result of distressful or undesirable experiences and memories in their previous area. For instance, for Violet, Stoke offered a new start and a degree of anonymity because she had escaped a domestic violence situation in another part of the UK:

"I want to stay. I'm not going back to [city]. I've got myself out of that. There's no way in hell I'd risk going back there. I like it round here, I'm settled. I moved in here when I was about two and half months pregnant. I'm five now, so I've lived here a few months and I like it. It's a nice area. It's nice for my son." (Violet, 23)

For another young male (Eddie), moving to Stoke was perceived to provide opportunities that he did not believe existed where he had been born. However, this did not mean he did not perceive or experience negative aspects of Stoke, too. Indeed, the reality for Eddie had not met his expectations and he stated that he regretted coming to Stoke because of the lack of job opportunities in the city:

Eddie: "I've been trying so hard like and the place is so crazy that I actually regret coming here, 'cause…"

Int: "Coming to the [hostel]?"
Eddie: "Coming to Stoke-on-Trent in general like. There really wasn't very much for me down there but I thought being a new city there'd be plenty of work like. I won't have to live on the dole and live on the dole paying for my house and things like that, be self-sufficient." (Eddie, 23)

The most pervasive narration of Stoke-on-Trent was that it was, in a variety of ways, a negative, hopeless and/or challenging place. Several individuals described the city as being a difficult place to live in. For Danielle, a lack of appropriate homelessness services had been problematic:

Danielle: "Stoke-on-Trent is the worst place for homelessness"
Int: "Why?"
Danielle: "'Cos there's nowhere for us. There's only two hostels – the Hope Street and the YMCA. They ought to build more hostels, 'cos obviously then there's a lot of people that are still homeless… There's nowhere you can go to get free food from. There used to be a day-care centre where if you're homeless it'd be open from nine o'clock till five. You used to be able to go in there, drink as many brews as you wanted, a dinner for a pound." (Danielle, 32)

For Derek, who grew up in what he describes as a 'middle-class area', relating to people in Stoke was something he found difficult to do, initially at least:

"I had real problems going out, making friends, socialising and I'll be honest with you mate, Stoke is such, it has such a different vibe to where I'm from. It's real working class whereas where I'm from is quite middle class. I don't know anything about football or anything like that, so I find it quite hard to kind of relate to the people I was working with." (Derek, 26)

> ❝ *I can't afford to go out and do that, but it's only three quid for three litres and it's going to get me smashed. They just fall into that pattern don't they?* ❞

In contrast to Derek, who did find work when he arrived in Stoke, it was the lack of employment opportunities that a number of people cited as their reason for finding the city a difficult place in which to live. For example, Jenny had been employed in the past but had lost her job and was struggling to find another:

> Jenny: *"I had a Saturday job when I was 15, that's the last time I worked, so, it's really hard, I mean there's nothing, especially in Stoke, there's nothing."*
> Int: *"Why do you say that about Stoke?"*
> Jenny: *"It's just, there's no jobs round here, no-one wants or hiring anyone, there's been loads of cuts everywhere like. I got made redundant because of the shop I was working couldn't afford to keep it open, like on the weekends and started closing and I lost my job, which is rubbish."* **(Jenny, 18)**

Similar experiences to Jenny's echoed throughout a number of the interviews. Interestingly, these views were held not only by young people who (like Jenny) had spent their whole lives living in Stoke but also by older people who had lived in other parts of the country. What is noteworthy is the perception that Stoke is somehow different from other towns and cities in terms of the opportunities that are available to people. It suggests the presence of an underlying assumption that there are better opportunities for people outside Stoke. Much of this negative narration of the area appears to have been influenced by the economic, social and psychological impact of the disintegration of local traditional industries. Freddy, for example, painted a bleak view of the city's future, suggesting that even the remaining jobs may not be around for much longer:

> *"Been in warehouse work before. It's all that's left in Stoke-on-Trent really, warehouse work. The way everything's going it won't be long before they're gone and then you're left with nothing, and this place will be left, well it's already had to recover since the miners went… take away the warehouses and this place will be wiped off the map, there'll be nothing left here."*
> **(Freddy, 19)**

Where there were work opportunities, they tended to be in low paid manual sectors offering people cash in hand work, which was precarious in nature. Consequently, people often did not know from one week to the next whether they would be in employment or not.

Unemployment and a lack of disposable income to spend on leisure activities is what drives some people toward unhealthy lifestyles, suggested Billy, a young man living in a hostel. In his view, a key issue is that there is very little for young adults to do that does not cost money:

> *"Not all of us are loaded and can afford to pay £6 to go to the pictures or whatever, can we? And in here everybody's in the same sort of situation aren't they? Everybody's skint. Most people are living on the dole. It's hard for them, so the easy answer is, "I can't afford to go out and do that, but it's only three quid for three litres and it's going to get me smashed." They just fall into that pattern don't they? It's very hard."* **(Billy, 23)**

Moving around in and outside of Stoke-on-Trent

For those people who arrived in Stoke-on-Trent, by choice or otherwise, the dominant narrative was that Stoke offered them a 'new start' in some way:

> *"There wasn't much work in [name of home town], so I decided to move down here, 'cause the family down here I didn't know very well and I wanted to get to know them. So I stayed with my auntie for a little bit. My dad had put a grand in my pocket to help me get myself set up."* (Derek, 25)

> Int: *"What was it about Stoke"?*
> Mandy: *"I don't know. Just quiet and chilled out and I've got nothing on. My family won't do anything for me so I've got nothing in [name of town] for me. A new start."*
> Int: *"What about friends and things like that?"*
> Mandy: *"Got them in [name of town], but I just wanted to make a new start like."* **(Mandy, 18)**

As discussed above, people often contrasted their experiences in Stoke-on-Trent with those elsewhere. Derek, for example, wanted to find work as well as move away from a relationship that had ended abruptly. Mandy wanted to

move away as a result of a poor relationship she had with her family, which was intertwined with her experience of violence and abuse within the family home when she was young. Ruth had experienced a catalogue of traumatic events in her life that was compounded by her excessive drug use. For such people, the movement to Stoke was intentional and positive. However, with the exception of Mandy, who was at an early stage of her re-housing, all had had bad experiences in Stoke since their move, and the city had failed to live up to their initial expectations.

An interesting element in the findings on mobility from the study has been the experience of numerous moves during the early years of life. This was particularly the case with people whose parent(s) had been in the armed services when they were younger. With hindsight, such experiences of moving were narrated as having been unhelpful for them, often giving rise to a longing for stability of some kind:

"Up to about the age of 12, 13. It was all just disruptive Army family. I come from an Army family so we never really stayed in one place for too long so it was always here there and everywhere… you didn't really get to make that many friends to be honest with you because you're moving. So at a certain point you kind of give up, do you know what I mean, stick to your own little think like and you don't really get that attached to people because you're moving on, do you know what I mean." (Jack, 29)

The interviews suggest that movement is rarely done for its own sake. Rather, movement within, into and out of the area, and the experience of this movement, were often related to other more complex issues such as parents' work, divorce or separation, experiences of abuse and of the care system, relationship breakdown, release from prison, and employment opportunities (or lack thereof). Although all these issues exerted their own pressures, people often narrated their experience of moving around as in itself a constant 'disruption' and as unsettling:

"With me moving, 'cos I've done a lot of moving. You'll be working one place and then you'll split up with the girlfriend that you're with so you'll move in your mates house or and then you'll move in with some other bird and then you're miles away from your job, d'you know what I mean. So your job'd always fuck up for you, but it was always 'cos I'd moved. I've never actually settled properly." (Shaun, 24)

However, to illustrate the diversity of the people we spoke to, on some occasions people felt mobility was enjoyable:

"At best, it was ace at best. Just meeting a new family and seeing how they've been brought up. I've been brought up in so many different ways by different families. I've learned little bits off people as it's gone along so I've enjoyed that and I've enjoyed touring England." (Jimmy, 20)

In summary

The specific backdrop of Stoke-on-Trent rarely featured in our respondents' life stories. Where it did feature, however, this almost always took a form where the economic and social decline of the city impacted on their ability to thrive. The opportunities and constraints afforded by the area contextualised many of their experiences as well as their expectations for the future. What clearly emerges from the stories, including those told by young people, are doubts and a lack of hope about the city's ability to provide

employment and prosperity for its citizens. What is striking, though, is that, despite these problems and the general despondency about the socio-economic situation, many people remained in the area whilst others returned after periods of absence. This indicates that the place of Stoke-on-Trent is tightly interwoven into the biographies of some, perhaps most, individuals, and this in turn suggests the existence of a strong attachment to place in various forms.

7 How services currently work together

As highlighted in Chapter 1, at a national level, there have been a number of developments that have shaped the contemporary response to homelessness. This includes the passing of the Homelessness Act 2002 and introduction of Local Homelessness Strategies (LHS); the introduction of Supporting People; and the Communities and Local Government's No one left out: Communities ending rough sleeping initiative in 2008. Underpinning these developments has been a reorganisation of homelessness governance making homelessness an issue needing addressing at the local level and embracing partnership with third sector agencies.

While inter-agency working has developed in many areas of service provision, it has been suggested that this was a relatively new idea in homelessness provision (Roche, 2004). Homelessness is seen as presenting particular difficulties for joint working. Indeed, commentators in the US, for example, make reference to a 'fragmentation' of homelessness services, suggesting a need for a more 'orderly' means for homeless people to access services (Hambrick and Rog, 2000: 354-55). Similar concerns have been raised in the UK, particularly in relation to the difficulties for both service users and providers in navigating through the various services available (Roche, 2004).

In this chapter we explore the issues emerging from interviews with service providers, focusing specifically on how different stakeholders talk about partnership work and their relationships with the organisations that they work alongside.

Partnership working in Stoke-on-Trent

There are a number of different factors that can shape the response to homelessness in a locality. One catalyst to the contemporary response to homelessness in Stoke-on-Trent was a tragedy that occurred in 2007, namely the death of two homeless people in a fire. This tragedy resulted in the development of a Priority Needs Group, created to deal more effectively with the situations and circumstances of people in greatest need in the city. The Priority Needs Group focused specifically on what service providers described as 'entrenched' homelessness. A number of respondents referred to this group as an example of 'good practice' in homelessness provision:

"We work within the Priority Needs Group… In these meetings we look at the history of each case and the issues relating to it. It is one of the best stakeholder workings that we have."
(Voluntary organisation representative)

"…I think the Priority Needs Group is a really good way of services working together. People come together on a fortnightly basis during the winter months and a monthly basis at other times of the year to talk about the most complex people… everybody there who attends the meetings is brutally honest about what they think about the services that that person could access..."
(Statutory organisation representative)

Furthermore, representatives of the Priority Needs Group highlighted that since its inception the Group had 'branched out' to focus on specific client groups:

"More recently we've set up a women's priority needs group... Again that pulls in not just our organisation, but women's projects as well."
(Voluntary organisation representative)

In addition to the Priority Needs Group, there was a consortium of three large voluntary organisations, which had developed from a re-commissioning of the statutory floating support services:

"… there were pockets of floating support that were exactly the same. It didn't work in the sense that there was no joined-up approach to it. There was no communication… so the thinking was that if we commissioned a service that has got three partners we get a broader range of service delivery rather than one organisation doing floating support and another organisation doing floating support, more often than not they were working with the same people, but they weren't talking to each other."
(Voluntary organisation representative)

The members of this consortium talked about this partnership in terms of providing a 'holistic' service for homeless people, thus catering for the diversity of needs and experiences.

" *there were pockets of floating support that were exactly the same. It didn't work in the sense that there was no joined-up approach to it. There was no communication… so the thinking was that if we commissioned a service that has got three partners we get a broader range of service delivery rather than one organisation...* "

'Professionalisation' of homelessness provision

The interviews highlighted a complex array of relationships in Stoke-on-Trent. Some respondents suggested that there were 'key players' in homelessness provision in the city. These organisations had become more 'professionalised' (Cloke et al., 2010) as a result of their funding and contractual obligations. Part of the professionalisation of homelessness services, for example, has involved the introduction of performance targets, with requirements to demonstrate reductions in rough sleeping and measurable movement of clients into accommodation (Cloke et al., 2010: 33). However, this focus on targets and outputs creates a temptation to 'select those who are more likely to contribute to achieving the targets and to ignore the most difficult cases' (Edgar et al., 1999: 67). It was evident that – due to their funding and subsequent targets – some organisations had seen changes in relation to the clients that they were able to take on. Consequently, there were concerns that services sometimes focused on those 'most likely to succeed':

"… the people that we used to accept were more chaotic, if you like, whereas now, we've got certain expectations, and there are contractual targets that our funders expect us to meet. So if we feel that somebody is too chaotic then we can't accommodate them, so we would signpost them to other organisations and we're very rigorous with the supporting information that we gather about a person before we accept them…the clients have to be more stable and more willing to engage with support whereas you know a few years ago, we would accept anybody really." (Voluntary organisation representative)

Working alongside these 'key players', however, were smaller organisations who had been able to benefit from the partnership approach that had developed. Indeed, to a certain extent some of the smaller organisations were filling a 'gap' left by the professionalisation of some of the other providers; for example, taking on some of the more 'chaotic' clients. These organisations formed part of an 'environment of choice' for homeless people (Cloke et al, 2010), providing an alternative, or in some cases, a second chance for certain client groups who did not 'fit' into the model of support:

> ❝ *the people that we used to accept were more chaotic, if you like, whereas now, we've got certain expectations, and there are contractual targets that our funders expect us to meet.* ❞

"… what you're finding with this often very chaotic client group is they'll burn their bridges. When guys present to us they've nine times out of ten burnt their bridges with the [larger organisations] and they're coming to us and they're saying, 'I know I've cocked up in the past. I know this is my last chance. If I don't do it here I'm on the streets'…You can't just have one service, one super company…because that excludes people once they've made a few mistakes, which they do because they're a chaotic and troubled client group." **(Voluntary organisation representative)**

Voluntary versus statutory organisations

While there was a perceived hierarchy among the third sector organisations in the city, it was evident that successful partnerships had developed, which were held up as exemplars of good practice. In contrast, the statutory agencies more often perceived as 'outsiders', with a strong 'us and them' discourse evident in a number of accounts. The accounts of some voluntary organisations included criticism of practical issues such as office hours:

"…people don't get homeless in office hours… Obviously the statutory stuff, they close down for Christmas. Now in our experience, in this centre, Christmas is our busiest time of the year." **(Voluntary organisation representative)**

An underlying theme in the accounts of the different services, however, related to 'preciousness' and 'competition' between the sectors. At best this 'split' manifested itself in an unwillingness to share information:

"They don't share, full stop. They don't like sharing. They won't share Risk Assessments with us, so they won't share information with us… It's like pulling teeth trying to get any information out of them unless they want our help." **(Voluntary organisation representative)**

and at worst, some voluntary sector organisations indicated that they had been told they were 'not allowed' to take particular clients:

> *"If a young person's being referred here for housing and one of the people working with them was the [statutory agency], I've got to say no. I think that's absolutely terrible… Because they want to be the only people working with them…They've said it to a number of agencies I believe."*
> *(Voluntary organisation representative)*

Future concerns – changing landscape of provision

It is important to take into consideration the timing of this research, which covers a period of significant political upheaval, with third sector organisations increasingly expected to take a lead in the provision of public services. In one way, this could work to the advantage of homelessness services in Stoke-on-Trent, because of the leadership role already taken by third sector organisations there. On the other hand, however, they could suffer because of their continued reliance on diminishing government funding. Government support already appears to have been reduced, rather than enhanced, which provokes concerns about the divisive impact of budget cuts and competition on service provision (Alcock, 2010). Indeed, the interviews carried out in Stoke-on-Trent suggest that the competition that already existed between services, coupled with the 'financial crisis', had already created an environment where both statutory and voluntary organisations were concerned about securing

resources. Discussions at one advisory group meeting highlighted the changing context of service provision and, perhaps unsurprisingly, people were concerned for the future of their organisations. More specifically, there were fears that a lack of resources could act as an impediment to joined-up working (Oldman, 1997). Indeed, as one respondent stated:

> *"Services are in competition ultimately in terms of money. We're about to head into a period of time where they're screaming 'There is no money and actually the money you've got won't be there'…And not just third sector agencies, but all agencies, statutory and third sector are all going to have funding cuts and I think sometimes people are a little bit fearful of getting together and coming up with a solution."*
> *(Voluntary organisation representative)*

Given this changing landscape, service providers were recognising the need to explore the involvement of new stakeholders in the response to homelessness across Stoke. This included the need to raise awareness of homelessness amongst the business leaders in the city. Indeed, it was felt that involving the business sector provided an additional source of potential funding for initiatives. More fundamentally, however, it was perceived as a necessary step towards tackling the unemployment and 'worklessness' that were seen underlie the issue of homelessness in Stoke-on-Trent. However, this raises a number of questions concerning not only how to engage with business leaders, but also how business partners might benefit from involvement in the issue of homelessness.

In summary

The interviews with service providers highlighted a range of issues. These were perceived to be 'key players' in homelessness provision in the city, who not only led a consortium of provision but were also members of the Priority Needs Group. These organizations had become more 'professionalized' as a result of funding and contractual arrangements; consequently, they faced restrictions on the types of clients they could support. Working alongside the key players were smaller organizations who, to a certain extent, provided an

alternative to the more 'structured' support available, particularly for those cases deemed most 'chaotic'. It was evident though that supporting the more entrenched cases remained a key issue within the city, and the smaller organizations were vital in offering a 'last chance' to some clients. However, there were growing concerns about the future of homelessness provision in the city, given the financial climate and budget cuts that had occurred. It was felt that this could potentially impact on partnership working in the city, particularly if organizations were competing for scarce resources.

8 Conclusions

This report has sought to highlight some of the key issues featuring in the lives of some of the most vulnerable people living in one English city. As the research was not led by a particular evaluation of an initiative or counting the times something had happened, the content of the interviews was directed by those whose stories we helped to generate.

It is easy to think of homeless people as a homogeneous group and of homelessness as primarily a housing issue. The reality is far more complicated. The question of what causes homelessness in the first place lacks any clear meaning. Homelessness involves, among other things, social policy, accommodation provision, poverty, individual histories, drugs, and violence. Whilst service providers in Stoke-on-Trent acknowledge that it is a complex issue, some tend to focus on the industrial decline of the area as a 'root cause'. This decline is undoubtedly a significant factor but, from the accounts provided by the people we spoke to, it is only one factor amongst many.

A clear conclusion from this research is that each individual's life story is unique to that person, and therefore the part that homelessness plays in that life story is also unique. It follows that supporting people through and out of homelessness can succeed by following a strictly personal approach. This research therefore highlights the value of providing a diverse pool of personalised accommodation and accommodation-related support for helping homeless people. It underlines the need for the personalisation of support in order to respond to how each individual lives within particular situations, having a unique personal history, and living in a complex network of people and organisations that is unique to that individual. Treating people as the same, or even similar, will always ensure there are winners and losers within the homeless population.

As Scott says,

"The homeless community, they always stick together, but when you're homeless and you're sitting on the streets begging and like people walk past you and you can hear to yourself, "Why don't they get a job? Why don't they get somewhere to live? Why don't they do something with their life instead of begging?" but if they knew what was going through, the way they had to do it, they wouldn't be contradicting people. Some people will give you money and some people will give you like buy you a sandwich or a cup of tea. Some people will just ignore you and walk away or give you a load of abuse, but you've got to sit there and take it. You can't give it them back because at the end of the day they think they're higher than you because you're on the streets. If you live on the streets you're the lowest of the lowest. You're in the gutter, aren't you and no one wants to speak to people who are in the gutter". **(Scott, 42)**

These findings suggest that the new approach, by many organisations, to pursue what is becoming known as 'psychologically informed services', is appropriate. The turn to a psychological approach is a relatively recent development in tackling homelessness. Previously, many ideas about homelessness have made assumptions about why it happens (usually the responsibility is assumed to lie either with the individual themselves or, alternatively, is the fault of 'society'). A further assumption is that, if we know what makes people homeless, then we can find out how to 'cure' it. However, seeking a richer understanding of homelessness allows for more personalised approaches to be developed. This is not just about what homelessness is, or necessarily how it ought to be fixed; it is about understanding the meaning of experience to those individuals labelled as homeless and about understanding how they see themselves within the social world (among their friends, family, peers, support workers, etc.).

In conclusion, it needs to be said that this report discusses only initial findings from our analysis of the 104 life stories of homeless people. We have chosen to focus on key narrative issues such as salient events, turning points, friendship networks, hostel life, and attachment to place. All of these have implications for service provision, but how services need to change in the light of these findings requires further discussion and reflection. Further analysis around substance misuse, mental health issues, domestic violence, childhood abuse and neglect, and many other core themes will undoubtedly have further implications for the conduct of services for homeless people. The findings arising from our research lead us to recommend a move towards more personalised services, involving a long-term caring relationship between each homeless person and a key worker who understands their needs and knows how to ensure that those needs are met

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