
Quality Standards in Homeless Services, Housing Led Approaches and the Legacy of ‘Less Eligibility’

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- › **Abstract_** *The European level debate about quality standards in homeless services has developed largely in isolation from the growing consensus that homelessness is a social phenomenon that can be ended through ‘housing led’ approaches, and as a result it runs the risk of setting homeless policy back by a generation.*
- › **Key Words_** *Quality standards, poor law, less eligibility*

Introduction

Over the last two decades, a key element of European Union economic policy has been to increase economic growth through further developing a single EU-wide market in the provision of services. It is argued that deregulation of service provision results in improved productivity, competition between providers, consumer choice and lower prices. However, such policies have also attracted criticism about their negative impact on social cohesion and equality (Héritier, 2001). Specifically, there has been concern that broader public service standards such as accessibility, continuity, security and affordability will be undermined in a deregulated environment. While this debate relates to a range of services, including utilities, one element of it has been concern about the implications of such deregulation on certain forms of social services, which are “solidaristic or redistributive, not for profit, protective and have an ‘asymmetric’ relationship between producer and consumer” (Spicker, 2011) – these have become known as social services of general

interest (SSGI). Legislation in this area includes regulations governing public procurement of services, state aid to public services, and the establishment of a European market of services.

As FEANTSA has pointed out, services for people who are homeless clearly fall under the concept of SSGI as defined in the European Commission's Communication on SSGI, 2007 (FEANTSA, 2010; European Commission, 2011). The overriding criticism of deregulation policies in the area of SSGI is that they will result in a 'race to the bottom', as providers seek to gain competitive advantage through cutting the quality of services. While concern about falling standards is common in the broader debate about deregulation, it has particular relevance for SSGI for a number of reasons. The first is that there is a relative absence of formal standards for the quality of service provision. This arises partly because these services were historically run as 'public services', driven, at least nominally, by the needs of the citizen requiring care. Furthermore, the idea of 'quality standards' is harder to stipulate and monitor in the area of social care than it would be in, for example, manufacturing or other parts of the service industry. As a result, there is no consensus about what forms of cost-cutting should be construed as generating legitimate efficiency savings, and what should be considered unacceptable reductions in service. This is further compounded by the general absence of consumer choice as a regulating force in this form of service. This is because of the 'asymmetric' relationship between the producer and consumer – such services are frequently provided to people who are too poor to be paying for the service from their 'own pocket' or too infirm to actively engage in selection of the service provider.

FEANTSA has played a positive role in actively supporting and encouraging a debate about the standards that should apply to homeless services. However, because of the large number of people requiring these services and because they are more likely to provide some areas of profit, the debate around, and the generation of new quality standards has been focussed on services for people who are elderly or have a disability. There is, of course, much to be learnt from the standards set in these well-developed social services, but the result has been to frame the discussion in such a way as to sidestep some of the crucial dilemmas that homeless services must confront if they are to promote a genuinely effective idea of 'quality' for people experiencing homelessness.

Many of these dilemmas have been manifest in the history of provision for people who are homeless or destitute, and, significantly, they re-emerge as challenges in light of the new 'housing first' or 'housing led' approaches, which are currently finding some favour.

Homelessness is Not a Condition to be Maintained

The quality discourse, which relates to services for people with disabilities and elderly people, is insufficient for a discussion of services for people who are homeless because they serve a fundamentally different purpose. At the core of my argument is a distinction between social services that essentially accept the ‘condition’ of the person to whom they are providing services, and those services whose purpose it is to assist with a transformation of that condition. Services for the elderly attempt to deal with the consequences of ageing and to ensure that, to the greatest extent possible, a full life can be lived in old age, but they don’t, at least in reputable services, propose to make a person any younger.

On the other hand, the primary purpose of labour market services for people who are of working age and unemployed is to end the person’s period of joblessness. Labour market interventions may aim to ensure that a full life can be led during the experience of unemployment, or they may aim to make the period particularly repellent, but this is either an instrumental or an accidental aspect of the intervention – it is not its primary purpose.

Of course, social services do not exist just at the extremes; there is a complex range of approaches, often changing on the basis of empirical evidence, progress or fashion. The situation of social services for people with a disability is particularly complex, with the ‘medical model’ of response – which would see people ‘recovering’ from their disability – increasingly being challenged by approaches that see disability as a form of diversity, and so focus on assisting the person to live as full a life as possible but without, in general, aiming to change the person themselves (Shakespeare *et al.*, 2009; Roush and Sharby, 2011). Different approaches may be appropriate for different forms and extent of ability/disability, with much of the discourse in social services concentrating on people with chronic and debilitating disabilities.

Historically, homelessness, like disability, can be found at various points along the spectrum during different periods of time. Approaches that attempt to manage homelessness or to respect a culture of homelessness (Law and John, 2012) are closer in nature to services for the elderly. However, services that adopt a ‘housing led’ or ‘housing first’ approach have the same fundamental objective as services for the unemployed – they see homelessness as a ‘transitional socio-economic condition’, out of which the service is designed to support a transition.

The idea of ‘quality of service’, therefore, means very different things at either end of this spectrum, and in the middle it can be very challenging indeed, raising a number of fundamental contradictions.

The problem is that if we apply an inappropriate concept of 'quality of service' to the provision of services for people who are homeless or unemployed, we make it more difficult for them to progress into independent living. For instance, one expectation of a good 'quality' welfare state might be that it would provide a person who is unemployed with sufficient income to live their life with dignity while they are out of work. However, it might also be true that if such welfare rates were significantly higher than the income the particular individual might obtain in the labour market, we would be making it more problematic for that individual to take up a job. For individuals with low earning potential or labour markets with low wage levels, this can create a real dilemma in establishing adequate welfare levels. At the other end of the spectrum, there is no level of old-age pension provision that can create an incentive to get older, or indeed to remain stubbornly youthful.

In the case of homelessness, this tension can be seen when we consider the quality of accommodation that can be provided to people in emergency homeless services. In a service for the elderly, quality provision would aspire to at least the standards available to someone able to exercise choice on an average income in the open market. In a homeless service, providing such accommodation in emergency situations is sure to raise the question of whether you are creating an incentive for people to opt into homelessness or remain 'stuck' in emergency provision.

This is not just true of physical accommodation, but also of food, income, medical care and other homeless services. So, for services which reject the 'managing homelessness' approach and adopt the 'housing led' approach, the quality of services must not just be considered in and of themselves, but also in relation to the prospects of transitioning out of homelessness. An inappropriate approach to 'high quality services' can trap people in their social exclusion, and there is, thus, a deep and largely unacknowledged tension between high service standards and expectations of exits from homelessness. There are resolutions to this tension, but importing the debate from essentially static services for the elderly and the chronically disabled does not help.

The problem is that the question of how to ensure that high quality services for those who are destitute does not trap people in their destitution resonates with some of the darker episodes of services for homeless people; it is uncannily similar to the concept of 'less eligibility', which was one of the underlying concepts in the Poor Laws of the 19th Century. The rule of 'less eligibility' meant that people seeking poor relief "were to be granted relief only in conditions so rigorous that no-one would voluntarily seek it in preference to work" (Thane, 1978, p.30).

These issues are not unique to the housing led approach, but apply to all models that seek some form of transition. Busch-Geertsema and Sahlin (2007, p.78) point out that "hostels are often embedded in a system of sanctions, such as a staircase

of transition, which tend to need a lowest rung to intimidate or motivate residents elsewhere to behave where they are. To keep that inferior status implies that hostels should not be too comfortable or nice, as people should be motivated to work for other solutions.” The ‘housing led’ approach and the question of ‘quality standards’ bring these questions back into relevance in a most uncomfortable way.

Services for the Homeless, Shelters and the Poor Laws

During the period of industrialisation in the 19th Century, workhouses or similar institutions were established in many countries throughout Europe and in the US. These institutions developed as a response to the perceived failures and cost of ‘outdoor relief’ (Harvey, 1984; Culhane, 1996), and they provided people who were poor with some form of support on the condition that they reside in the workhouse and submit to its regulations. Workhouses were seen as a solution to a number of problems associated with ‘outdoor relief’ – they were intended to be less expensive, rehabilitative and also provide a deterrent to able-bodied people preferring relief to employment.

Workhouses brought together the whole spectrum of people who were poor, and linked the provision of shelter with the provision of other forms of relief. In Ireland, the UK and the US, like many other parts of Europe, homeless services are the direct descendants of Poor Laws and specifically the provision of workhouses from the middle of the 19th Century. For example, in Ireland the workhouses were rebranded as ‘County Homes’ in the early 20th Century and their ‘casual wards’ continued to be the main refuge of the homeless until the mid-1980s (Harvey, 1984); part of one former workhouse building continues to be used as a homeless shelter.

Katz argues that the lodging houses and boarding houses, which were the successors to workhouses in the US in the early 20th Century, “inherited the mixed goals of the poorhouse: shelter, punishment, deterrence” (quoted in Culhane, 1996). Poorhouses were ultimately seen as failing due to the contradictions in their objectives. Initially, a ‘rehabilitative’ objective had been central to their role; this was gradually replaced with a punitive function, partly as a result of ‘rehabilitative’ approaches turning out to be less successful and more expensive than expected (Culhane, 1996), but also because they conflicted with the objective of deterrence, the primary objective of which was to distinguish between the ‘deserving’ and the ‘undeserving’ poor.

This distinction is, at one level, a moral one; the ‘deserving’ are those who require assistance through no fault of their own (largely widows, the sick, the elderly and children, particularly orphans) and the ‘undeserving’ are those whose own behaviour is responsible for landing them where they are (drug takers, gamblers, drunks and

the lazy). Those who have too many children to support move from 'deserving' to 'undeserving' depending upon their marital status and as social attitudes to birth control shift (Thomas, 1997). A lot has been written and said about these kinds of distinctions but for our purposes another distinction, which occurred repeatedly in Poor Law legislation, is more relevant – the distinction between those who are 'able-bodied' and those who are not.

Historically, public provision for people who are poor, homeless and destitute has been almost universally appalling. This is not simply a function of their poverty in itself; it is the mechanism through which free provisions have been rationed. If we are to start handing out food and shelter to people without control over who will take it up, there may be no end to the takers. However, if we make the quality of provision and the circumstances of its distribution humiliating and demeaning, we will go some way to ensuring that only those who really need it actually come forward.

In 1848 the Irish Poor Law Board, for instance, complained that "the roughness of the lodging and the coarseness of the fare provided are not sufficient to deter the dishonest vagrant" (Harvey, 1984). In the industrial era, if the working and living conditions for most working people were extremely harsh, it was essential that conditions in the provisions for the poor were even harsher. Emerging capital needed labour in the factories, but needed it at very low wages. While social concern required that there be some provision for the genuinely needy, it must be such as to 'deter' those who had any alternative.

Few, if any, modern homeless services operate with this form of overt moralising approach. But behind the cruel and moralising approach of Victorian Poor Law there is a real tension, which we continue to grapple with today. At least we should grapple with it, if we are to understand properly the meaning of 'quality' as we shift towards a 'housing led' approach to homelessness. To close our eyes to this tension and how it is rooted in the history of the services we offer will draw us back to a 'managing homelessness' approach that is sensitive to every human right – except the right to a home.

Conclusion

I have repeatedly drawn the parallel between homelessness and unemployment because I think that there is a lot of learning that homeless services can draw on, perhaps not from the practice of state employment services, but certainly from some of the better research and NGO interventions in the field. Historically, the approach to tackling unemployment is drawn from the same workhouse approach that informed historic views of homelessness. It was not called the 'work' house for nothing; often,

people who were homeless were required to undertake 'hard labour' in exchange for shelter. For economists, the underlying labour market equation has always been that *low welfare rates plus regular humiliation is equal to an incentive to work.*

However, a great deal of research and experience has made the surprising discovery that human beings are a bit more complex than this. Particularly in a modern economy where people require complex social skills to be productive employees, obtaining and holding a job requires self-confidence and skills (Nicaise, 2011). Contrary to all the predictions of the economists, it turns out that such skills and confidence are rarely developed through poverty, fear and insecurity. While constant encouragement and even pressure may be required, the best outcomes seem to emerge when this happens in the context of recognition of the humanity and needs of the individual. Thus, the evidence suggests that *a decent income plus decent treatment plus a persistent supportive push equals a progression to work.* Or to put it more crudely, 'a kick in the arse is not the cure for a life of being kicked in the teeth.'

By recognising that we are looking at social services with a different purpose than those which support the elderly, and by drawing from some of the better insights from the labour market, I hope to bring two key elements into the quality debate.

First, a recognition that the notion of standards and their evaluation must be carried out in the context of the needs of the person who is homeless. Within the housing led approach these needs are best understood through the customer care plan established with the person himself or herself, including a plan for ultimate disengagement and independent living. All questions of quality need to be assessed in the context of how they serve this plan.

Secondly, while physical standards for accommodation are, of course, important and must be established and maintained, the quality of the human relationships are the central feature of quality. Means of assessing and valuing these relationships are crucial. By no means do I think that these are the only lessons to be learnt from broadening the quality debate – they are only a preliminary stab from someone not involved directly in front line services. But I do believe that a more honest appraisal of the history and inherent tensions within homeless provision will help us to assemble a framework of quality assessment that is appropriate to achieving a 'housing led' approach to tackling homelessness.

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