

Christian Action Bristol

Housing and Homelessness

20 January 2016

Introduction

These notes and questions have been put together to provide a framework for considering the issues of housing and homelessness at the meeting on 20 January. If you have answers or partial answers to any of the questions, or have other relevant questions to ask, please let me know.

The problem

We know there is a housing problem in Bristol, but exactly what is it, what is being done and what more needs to be done about it? These basic questions can be broken down into smaller parts.

1. What is the problem?
 - a) What is the nature of the problem?
 - b) What is the location of the problem?
 - c) What is the size of the problem?
 - d) What is already being provided?
2. What is being done?
 - a) What is currently in place to address the problem?
 - b) What is being planned, and when?
3. What more can be done?
 - a) How much more housing needs to be found?
 - b) What are the possible answers?
 - c) Who can make this happen?
 - d) How can people play a part in making this happen?

When considering housing, we need to look at:

- provision (is it available?);
- cost (is it affordable?); and
- facilities (what the accommodation provides and the access it has to local services).

Some related areas

Housing cannot be considered entirely on its own.

Transport also needs to be taken into account: where the housing needs to be provided depends in part on the availability, speed and cost of transport, both public

and private: fundamentally between where people live, work and shop; but also other factors such as the catchment areas of good schools, play areas for children, where people access entertainment (which could be anything from pubs to theatres to green spaces) and the wider transport networks.

All these other factors affect where the housing is needed; and the provision of housing affects these other factors. This feedback loop makes reliable planning impossible – a good supply of affordable housing, for example, will tend to attract new employers into the area, which will increase the demand for housing. This is not an argument that nothing should be attempted, and no planning undertaken, simply a recognition that a realistic objective is to improve the problem because we are unlikely to solve it completely.

Details

1 a) The nature of the problem

The problem is often summarised very simply: we need more housing in Bristol; but we need to be a bit more specific, and the problem is not simply about the quantity of housing. There are a number of questions which need to be considered.

- *How much housing is needed (how many units)?*
- *What type of housing is needed (room, flat or house, how many bedrooms, how many people can live there, is there a garden, a garage, space to park a car, two cars or three cars)?*
- *Where is it needed?*
- *On what basis (short-term rent, long-term rent or buy)?*
- *At what price?*
- *With what local facilities (shops, banks, schools, places of worship, community halls, access to public transport)?*

When we talk about housing, we are talking about places for people to live – not just a roof over their heads. Homeless people need a home, not just a house: somewhere they have the right to be, with a front door key to give them the right of access and the right to choose to keep other people out, where they can securely store their own belongings and where they have a degree of control over who lives with them.

1 b) The location of the problem

One assumption is that the housing problem affects all areas of Bristol, so more housing is needed in all areas, but is this actually the case?

- *Do we need to increase the supply of housing in every area of Bristol, or is the need concentrated in some areas – and, if so, which ones?*

Whatever the size of the need, it is in practice easier to develop housing in some areas than in others.

The housing problem in Bristol cannot be addressed within the city boundaries: a significant part of Bristol's housing stock lies within South Gloucestershire.

- ***When we talk about the housing problem in Bristol, what is the geographical area we are talking about? Is it the area within which people commute to Bristol, or something else?***

1c) The size of the problem

A basic starting point is that everyone in a hostel is homeless and in need of accommodation. Presumably the Outreach Team know of others who are sleeping rough, in tents, in squats, on friends' floors and other places, who are equally in need of somewhere to live.

- ***Do we have reasonable figures for the number of people in each of these categories?***
- ***How many of these people are refugees and asylum seekers, and how many more do we realistically expect to arrive in Bristol over the next five years?***

The next starting point for understanding the size of the problem is the Bristol Supported Housing Register, so an obvious question is: what can we tell from the Register?

- ***How many people on the Register are looking for accommodation with space for more people? How many more?***
- ***How many people on the Register are looking for accommodation of a different kind (location, facilities, etc.) but are not looking for more bedrooms?***
- ***How many people on the Register are looking to downsize?***

However, the number of people registered as looking for another property is not the same thing as the size of the problem: the actual problem could be higher or lower.

- It could be higher because there will be people looking for accommodation who are not on any official list.
- It could be lower because many of those looking for accommodation already have inadequate or inappropriate accommodation, so finding them a new place will free up the place where they move from.

Another question which needs to be considered is: how accurate is the Register? There are several aspects to this.

- Some records in the Register will be out of date. People are added to the Register and then discover that they will not be offered what they are looking for any time soon, so they find other solutions and fail to update the Register when their circumstances change.

- Some people will be looking for accommodation which is technically unsuitable: typically, this is the case with fathers who are separated from the mother(s) of their children and want accommodation which includes space for their children to stay with them for part of the week.
- *Do we have any figures on how accurate the Register is?*

1 d) What is already being provided?

If we are to understand the housing problem, we must know not only how much more housing is required, but also how much housing is already in use. There is a big difference between needing to increase the housing supply by 1% and needing to increase it by 25%

In considering the existing housing stock, we need to know all the usual details (how many bedrooms, how many people can live there, etc.) but also the condition of the buildings and their expected lifespan: you can move people into houses scheduled for demolition as a short-term response, but it is not a long-term solution.

- *How much housing do we already have, of each type?*
- *How much housing do we have which is suitable for or adapted for people with specialist needs – people who use wheelchairs, have addictions, learning difficulties, language difficulties, ... ?*

2 a) What is currently in place to address the problem?

There are a few different ways to tackle the problem. The two obvious basic responses are to increase the supply of housing and decrease the need for it.

Produce new housing

This is an important and obvious approach.

The advantages include:

- it generates new housing;
- in principle, the housing produced can be carefully matched to the need; and
- it can be undertaken on a commercial basis.

The disadvantages include:

- it requires a great deal of capital investment;
- it can only be done if suitable land is available; and
- the whole process (creating a viable scheme, land purchase, planning permission and building) inevitably takes a long time.

Make use of housing which is currently empty

This generally requires some form of renovation.

- *Are there sufficient incentives for making use of empty homes? Are*

there barriers which could be removed or reduced? Are there policy or legal changes which would increase the housing supply?

- *Can we speed up the process by which unused housing is brought back into use?*
- *People will squat in dreadful conditions. Is there any scope for allowing people to camp in un-renovated houses before they are fixed? Possibly even get them involved in the process of renovation, as a form of apprenticeship?*

Make more effective use of the housing we already have

The Government's 'bedroom tax' is intended to make better use of our housing stock by giving people a financial disincentive to remain in a property which has more bedrooms than they need – actually, more than they are supposed to need. This is a very blunt approach: people often have good reasons for not wanting to move, or for wanting a property with more bedrooms than the Government thinks they need.

Another approach is to encourage people with a spare bedroom to fill it – to let it out. For example, parents with a child at university might let the bedroom to another university student during term-time. Or an elderly person might let a room to a younger person at a reduced rate in return for some companionship and assistance with living.

Young people have often lived together out of necessity, until they can afford a place of their own, but they can also choose to live together intentionally on a longer-term basis. This can be anything from a stable living arrangement through to different forms of intentional community.

Married couples and families can share their home with single people on a long-term basis. There are increasing numbers of communal homes, operating with a variety of objectives and models, but they all make effective use of building for housing people.

- *Are there ways to encourage and support these forms of shared and communal living?*
- *Are there barriers to these arrangements which could be reduced or removed?*

Enable people to access the housing which currently exists

Access to housing is limited by finance, and, to a lesser extent, by transport. While it is not easy, both these problems can be addressed: Deposit Bond schemes help people access private rented accommodation, for example.

The human factors are harder to address. People generally become homeless for a complex set of reasons, including debt and relationship breakdown; people who have been homeless for some time generally (but not always) add to these problems with alcohol and drugs, and with damaged physical and mental health.

- *How many people are unable to access the housing they need simply*

due to lack of finance?

- *How many people are unable to access the housing they need until the factors associated with a chaotic lifestyle have been sufficiently addressed? How readily available is this help they need?*

Convert other types of buildings into housing

For example, some people are working to convert empty office blocks into accommodation.

- *Is there scope for more to be done in this area?*
- *Could other types of building be converted?*

Decrease the need for housing

This is mainly a longer-term strategy.

Every divorce doubles the number of housing units a family requires; if there are children and the parents both stay in touch, then both parents will want to have space in their accommodation for their children to stay overnight. So strategies which decrease the divorce rate will reduce the demand for housing.

Divorce also increases the pressure on housing because of the frequent relationship difficulties between children and step-parents causing the children to leave home sooner than they would have liked.

If young people are able to stay in the family home when they leave school and get a job, this will reduce the need for housing for single people.

- *What other social changes could reduce the need for housing in the longer run?*

2b) *What is being planned?*

- *What is in the pipeline, with a plan, timescale and funding?*
- *When should it start and when should it be complete?*
- *How confident are we that each of these plans will actually be completed on or near schedule?*

3a) *How much more housing needs to be found?*

In the light of what is already being done and already being planned, where are the gaps? If all the planned activity takes place, what would still be missing?

When considering the gaps, there are some obvious questions.

- *Which are the largest (affecting the greatest number of people)?*
- *Which are the most significant (affecting people to the greatest extent)?*
- *What needs to be done most urgently?*

- *What can be done most quickly?*

3b) What are the possible answers?

We are not looking for complete answers, but for ideas which can make the situation better for some people.

- *What else can be done which would move us in the right direction?*

3c) Who can make this happen?

The main players are obvious.

- Emergency accommodation providers
- Hostel providers
- Social housing providers
- Private landlords
- Landowners, property developers and the Planning Department

3d) How can people play a part in making this happen?

Supported accommodation is expensive, in part because the tenancies often fail, resulting in voids, administration costs and (because of the state the property is often left in) renovation and redecorating costs; and in part because of the cost of providing support to the tenants. Clearly, the more effective the support, the fewer the number of failed tenancies and the less the associated costs.

- *Is there scope for more people to get involved in tenancy support on a voluntary basis?*

Some Related Questions

When considering housing and homelessness, it is easy for the conversation to get side-tracked. The point is this last section is to acknowledge these other issues, are real and valid, but we aim to leave the conversation for another time.

Housing and money

Housing is one perspective on the problem: money is another. If you are rich enough, you can find somewhere to live. The problem can be seen not as a lack of housing, but as a lack of affordable housing.

This is true in part: there is a scarcity of housing, so market forces drive up the price. The richest can pay more, so they can always find somewhere to live; and if a homeless person had enough money, they would not be homeless. But the fundamental problem is still a lack of housing: if everyone was suddenly rich, we would still not have enough places for everyone to live.

Market forces

So market forces are an important part of the picture; but only to a certain extent. According to economic theory, market forces should ensure that every human need (including housing) should be met at the cheapest possible price, and this is clearly not happening.

We do not live in a completely free market, and people are divided on whether this would be a good thing. But, whatever your position on the ideal arrangement, under the present system it seems clear that the market alone cannot be relied upon to deliver the housing we need, which is why we need to work and plan to see that (as far as possible) everyone has somewhere to live.

Mobility

Bristol is not the only place in the country with a housing problem. When looking at the UK as a whole, there is a shortage of housing in the South (where the jobs are) and a surplus of housing in the North (where there are not enough jobs). There are reasons why employers like providing jobs in places like Bristol, and reasons why people like living here.

The reality is that, if we get anywhere near solving the housing problem in Bristol, we will find more people coming here because the problem is worse where they are. But that is not a reason to do nothing: we can help some people, even if we can't help everyone; and the solutions we find here can probably be applied in other places too.

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