Approaching systems change at Fulfilling Lives South East in efforts to improve unsupported temporary accommodation: a qualitative case study

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Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this paper is to consider how a South East project approached systems change to improve unsupported temporary accommodation (UTA) and the changes made for people experiencing multiple disadvantage (''multiple and complex needs''). This paper also covers some matters that are hard to change or uncertain, such as housing shortages and financial constraints. The paper focuses on a case study of the East Sussex Temporary Accommodation Action Group (TAAG) – a multi-agency action group.*

Design/methodology/approach – *A qualitative case study involving a thematic analysis of seven semi-structured interviews, with a review of published literature and internal documentation.*

Findings – *This example of setting up a TAAG shows us the value of having a dedicated forum to look at a part of the system that requires changing and to identify what works well. Creating a collaborative and democratic space with a common purpose brings different stakeholders and perspectives together and opens discussions to new ways of working. Equalising partners creates an opportunity to create change from the bottom-up within a system traditionally governed by statutory bodies. This study found that the TAAG has facilitated learning around trauma-informed practice and nurtured more sustainable changes towards a Standards Charter and women-only safe UTA.*

Originality/value – *This is one of the first qualitative case studies of a local systems change approach to improving UTA for people experiencing multiple disadvantage in East Sussex.*

Keywords *Homelessness, Systems change, Multiple disadvantage, Multiple and complex needs, Temporary accommodation, Unsupported temporary accommodation*

Paper type *Case study*

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Introduction

Many people who face multiple disadvantage (see "Definitions") are living in unsafe and insecure temporary accommodation, with limited support from local authorities, unable to move on from their situations. Living in these circumstances can lead to a cycle of homelessness, between unsupported temporary accommodation (UTA) and the street. This paper considers how a local systems change approach has been used to improve UTA through a multi-agency action group – the East Sussex Temporary Accommodation Action Group (TAAG) – for people experiencing multiple disadvantage.

There is a concurrence within the literature that homelessness specifically affects this social "group" whose situation can be related to connections between homelessness, health and social care needs, including mental and physical health, substance misuse and offending (Dobson, 2019; Adamson *et al.*, 2019; Cornes *et al.*, 2014). This is a national problem, and

from a snapshot national government survey in 2020, almost half (44%) of people sleeping rough were in London and the South East (MHCLG, 2021). The East Sussex TAAG covers the boroughs of Eastbourne and Hastings, in which 14 and 17 people, respectively, were sleeping rough according to the government survey – some of the highest numbers in the southeast (MHCLG, 2021). Although the survey indicates that rough sleeping reduced during the pandemic, the demand for UTA has considerably increased at the same time. Temporary accommodation is usually a last resort for single homeless individuals and families to avoid street homelessness, and often, the accommodation does not meet many basic housing standards (Gosmann *et al.*, 2020, p. 33).

The mainstream approach to tackling homelessness with "continuum care" and the "staircase model" starts with emergency accommodation or a hostel and moves gradually towards an ideal of independent living with minimum services (Sahlin, 2005). This traditional model is expensive to operate, and often, people fall out of the system (Goering *et al.*, 2014; Padgett *et al.*, 2016). In the long-term, "housing first" or "housing-led" solutions seem to be the key to tackling homelessness for people experiencing multiple disadvantage (The Centre for Social Justice, 2017). The Housing First (HF) model, first developed by a psychologist, Tsemberis, in New York City, has rapidly overtaken as the leading approach in the USA and Canada, now extending across Australia and Europe. In opposition to the mainstream, the key HF concepts involved consumer choice to move straight into a furnished home, community-based mobile support services, permanent scatter-site housing and harm reduction (Padgett *et al.*, 2016). The Canadian Government also made investments exceeding $700m into the evidence-based HF model with its "At Home/Chez Soi Project" (Goering *et al.*, 2014). The final national report in Canada concluded that "Housing First rapidly ends homelessness" (Goering *et al.*, 2014, p. 31).

However, in the short-term, working with the existing local system is a way to start the journey towards systems change, by improving UTA standards to better meet the immediate needs of people experiencing multiple disadvantage. This qualitative study considers a local systems change approach to this problem through a case study of the East Sussex TAAG including interviews with the different actors involved.

This paper explores the question: "What is the role of the TAAG in improving unsupported temporary accommodation for people experiencing multiple disadvantage and how does it approach systems change?" The first section of this paper sets out different approaches to systems change found in the literature and situates the approach taken through the TAAG by Fulfilling Lives South East (FLSE). This leads onto the background to the East Sussex TAAG case study to explain how it began, followed by a detailed methodology with the story behind the research and methods. Next, the study moves into the five key themes that emerged from the research. These include creating a collaborative and democratic space to raise awareness, equalising partners, facilitating learning, nurturing change and raising concerns about the future of the TAAG's funding and continued work. This paper also covers matters which are hard to change or uncertain, such as housing shortages, data protection issues and local authority budget cuts. Finally, the study concludes with some key recommendations for local authorities on how to take forward the work of the East Sussex TAAG and identifies limitations of this study and potential areas for further research.

Definitions

In the context of this research, multiple disadvantage was defined as recent or ongoing experience of three or more of the following issues: offending, alcohol or substance issues, homelessness and mental health problems (Hough, 2021; Bramley *et al.*, 2015). At FLSE, domestic abuse (DA) was another major factor. Over half of the project's clients were women, and according to a snapshot survey taken in December 2018, 93% of the women on the caseload had experienced DA (Hough, 2016; FLSE, 2018).

This paper defines "unsupported temporary accommodation (UTA)" in common with Justlife's report on hidden homelessness as: "private, short-stay accommodation in which households do not have permanent residency status and limited access to local authority support to find settled accommodation. It includes Bed & Breakfasts (B&Bs), short-stay HMOs, private hostels, emergency accommodation and guesthouses" (Maciver, 2018).

Systems change and networks

At FLSE, we have a clear focus on nurturing change. However, change is rarely something we can do in isolation and systems change theory has provided a useful lens to guide partnership working to achieve social change. Cross-sector partnerships involving business, government and civil society are a prominent feature within research and practice to address social problems and create system-level change (Clarke and Crane, 2018). Collaboration can be complicated and demanding, but for complex social issues such as homelessness, it is essential to work across sectors to develop common understandings of the problem and make commitments to common solutions (Bryson et al., 2015).

Donella Meadows, a systems analyst who pioneered systems thinking, highlights the intrinsic interconnectivity at play in systems. Meadows stresses that "a system isn't just any old collection of things. A system is an interconnected set of elements that is coherently organized in a way that achieves something" (Meadows, 2009, p. 11). Meadows' (2009) approach highlights the importance of interconnectivity and suggests disruptions in the way elements of a system are organised could change what that system achieves. Guidelines are provided around where to intervene in the system and how to live with the system. Notably, one of the top areas for intervention mentioned is "standards" (Meadows, 2009, p. 194). The TAAG is a good example of this, which seeks to intervene by improving UTA standards.

Meadows' (2009) work reminds us that change can rarely be done without a combination of "soft" and "hard" interventions. This too is reflected in the sector guidance – *Systems Change: A guide to what it is and how to do it* – developed by New Philanthropy Capital (NPC). The guide sets out six key principles for systems change. The first three principles are in the planning stage: "understand needs and assets, engage multiple actors and map the systems". For the implementation stage, they recommend to "do it together, distribute leadership and foster a learning culture" (Abercrombie et al., 2015, pp. 27–36). NPC highlight that a collaborative approach to systems change will increase the chances of systems changes being more successful, and although not easy, they stress that "Engaging multiple actors is key and we need to keep an open mind about who to engage and how" (Abercrombie et al., 2015, p. 33).

Through this lens, FLSE sought ways to address challenges in the UTA and wider housing system in East Sussex. Theory guided us towards collaborative approaches, and we also looked for existing interventions that were working well to tackle this issue in other areas of the country. We looked for what "positive deviants" were at play in the system – people who display positive behaviours without following the trend, leading to better outcomes (Sternin and Choo, 2000). Pioneered by Jerry Sternin, who believes that "What is important is identifying the relevant positive deviancy within each local community and then getting everyone to adopt that behavior" (Sternin and Choo, 2000). This led us to the idea of the TAAG – a multi-stakeholder group set up and facilitated by the charity Justlife, which builds on positive behaviours to create change.

With multiple factors and multiple agents at play in any given system, a network such as the "TAAG" can provide space to explicitly interconnect and join up systems elements and agents, even if only temporarily, into one meeting. Existing TAAGs had raised challenges and named concerns as well as started to build group-led solutions. The initiative sat well

with systems change guidance to seek collaborations, build on positive elements within a system and shape common goals to foster change.

Background – case study of the East Sussex Temporary Accommodation Action Group

Through FLSE casework (2015–2019), several issues emerged for clients with complex needs being placed in UTA by Eastbourne and Hastings Borough Councils. Examples included lack of support for specific needs and a lack of UTA staff understanding of how past trauma can affect behavior, often leading to evictions.

Government statistics based on the statutory definition of homelessness indicate that households living in temporary accommodation are increasing in the long-term, reaching 96,600 at the end of June 2021 (Wilson and Barton, 2021, p. 10; DLHC, 2021). However, Maciver's (2018, pp. 13–14) report suggests these figures are considerably higher for UTA, which includes unofficial temporary accommodation such as B&Bs and emergency accommodation.

Discussions around issues in UTA culminated in a FLSE Learning Event in February 2019 to highlight the issues experienced in UTA by our clients and to discuss forming a TAAG locally as a potential solution. Representatives from Justlife, local housing authorities and UTA providers were in attendance. The consensus was that forming an East Sussex TAAG would be welcomed and so a few months after the event, the first East Sussex TAAG was held. This has now developed into a regular, well-attended action group chaired by the Chief Executive Officer of Eastbourne Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB).

Methodology

The research centred on how systems change was approached, and the changes that were created to improve UTA for people experiencing multiple disadvantage, including matters that were hard to change or uncertain. The case study involved a multi-agency action group – TAAG in East Sussex.

Literature search strategy

In an initial review of literature, external reports relevant to the study were gathered from the authors' knowledge and experience in this area. As a follow-up, a two-level Boolean search strategy was made using key terms "multiple and complex needs" combined with "housing" and synonyms. After reviewing titles and abstracts, a second search was made for "temporary accommodation" combined with "systems change" and synonyms. The search involved IBSS and Web of Science databases, Housing Studies, Social Care Online and Housing, Care and Support journals. The literature was reviewed to inform the wider context for the case study, set out the different approaches to systems change and to include within the relevant themes from the empirical data.

Design

The qualitative case study methodology involved triangulation of data and methods with semi-structured interviews using a thematic analysis, published literature and internal documentation from the East Sussex TAAG. The empirical data for this small-scale evaluative case study was gathered during a concentrated period in November 2021, to gain an in-depth understanding of the case, rather than generalising to the population at large. Interview questions were designed around the main research aims to explore how systems change was approached through the TAAG, what improvements were made to UTA and challenges or uncertainties around development of the TAAG's work. The interview questions were reviewed and piloted by people with lived experience of multiple

disadvantage. All interview data were anonymised, and participants were provided with an information sheet, an opportunity to ask questions at the interview and informed consent was granted by each participant with a signed consent form. All interviews were video recorded with consent and were conducted via video link by two researchers, including an Engagement and Co-production Worker, who offered lived experience insights throughout the research process.

Participants

Seven key participants were interviewed, drawn from East Sussex TAAG and the founders of the first TAAG in Manchester, which influenced the East Sussex TAAG. Purposive sampling ensured that participants reflected different perspectives from across local authority, the Voluntary Sector for homelessness and multiple disadvantage, UTA providers and different service agencies. Without any UTA residents in the TAAG as yet, these members were the closest representatives.

Analysis

The interview questions were transcribed verbatim, and a realist thematic analysis, involving experiential themes (subjective viewpoints such as hopes, concerns and feelings), of the interview data was carried out and co-produced within the authorship team. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) method, all four members of the authorship team analysed and coded the interview data in a collaborative session, focusing on the main research aims. Using an inductive approach based on themes emerging from interview participants, the authorship team searched and discussed potential themes arising from the coded data and matched the data against them. Authors collaborated to review the themes and how the coded data had been matched, assuring agreement among raters. A thematic structure was created with five key themes closely linked to the data (Patton, 1990, cited in Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 83). Finally, the second author searched the minutes of the East Sussex TAAG for further details to help explain the issues arising within the themes.

Results

From the thematic analysis, the five main themes were drawn from the data, including "Creating a collaborative and democratic space", "Equalising partners", "Facilitating learning", "Nurturing change" and "Future concerns".

Creating a collaborative and democratic space

Interviewees valued the TAAG's multi-stakeholder space where UTA could be the focus of conversations and decisions. Several felt challenges associated with UTA could be shared in this meeting space, and prior to TAAG starting, this was a hidden issue within the housing system that perpetuated hidden homelessness. As a Voluntary Sector representative explained:

> I think just putting it on the map, I think that's the first way that it can start to bring about some social change.

It was the first opportunity to hear about some of the poor standards of UTA; as a Voluntary Sector representative described,

> [. . .] the kind of standards that we were hearing about were just ridiculous [. . .] Maybe there will be a bed, but there wouldn't be anything else. There would be no bedding, there'd be no furniture, there'd be nothing to cook on and a lack of support for those people in terms of access to other agencies and feeling often disconnected.

One interviewee highlighted how unusual a space like the TAAG is as it brings together both the for-profit and not-for-profit sectors. The Voluntary Sector representative explained,

> They didn't think we could ever have two different providers of emergency accommodation in the same room, they didn't think we could have people that were living there [in temporary accommodation] in the same room as the landlords, because there would just be too much hostility.

A number of contributors reflected on how the TAAG was set up and facilitated, and most shared the view that the process felt collaborative and democratic. Developing a common set of values and common purpose was used as a tool to pave the way for systems change, as described by interviewees:

> […] focusing on not having a blame culture […] and the fact that everyone was sort of an equal, and that we wanted to respect one another' (Voluntary Sector representative, Manchester TAAG).

> We identified various issues within the process and then shared them with all the people that attended [the initial learning event],

> We did it in a very kind of considered, diplomatic way, the way that we shared the information […] on casework so no one could dispute it,

> We created a [shared] TAAG Action Plan as well' (Voluntary Sector representative, East Sussex TAAG).

Fostering collaboration aligns well with prominent system change theories that encourage collaboration as part of any systems change process. The NPC view is that "a collaborative approach should be the presumption of anyone ambitious to change a system. That does not mean; however, it is easy to do". (Abercrombie *et al.*, 2015, p. 33).

There was a strong feeling among interviewees, particularly temporary accommodation (TA) providers, that the TAAG is driven by a shared goal which unites all members:

> […] you're sort of pushing against an open door, really (TA Provider 1).

> […] the key thing for me is everybody believes in the overall goal, which is we need to improve the journey – everybody believes it, but it's how we get there. And that is the challenge (TA Provider 2).

This expression of "common purpose" suggests the TAAG may nurture systems change. Donella Meadows advocates that "an overarching goal" can have a transformative impact on bringing about systems changes:

> The most effective way of dealing with policy resistance is to find a way of aligning the various goals of the subsystems, usually by providing an overarching goal that allows all actors to break out of their bounded rationality. If everyone can work harmoniously towards the same outcome […] the results can be amazing" (Meadows, 2009, p. 115).

Equalising partners

The way in which the TAAG brings together the different actors within the TA system into a more equal space was observed by an East Sussex TAAG representative,

> […] the local authorities tend to think [talking about TA] that they are the only players involved because they do have statutory responsibility […] and that's not the case because so many other providers and so many other support agencies can offer a great deal and that I think is what has really been brought together in the East Sussex TAAG. It's almost kind of equalising of the partners.

On the other hand, involving lived experience voices in the East Sussex TAAG is felt to be quite a challenge. East Sussex TA providers along with a variety of East Sussex services share common views about the barriers on gathering voices of people experiencing multiple disadvantage to feed into the TAAG.

> [...] even when you promise that you're going to anonymise data. I think there's still...there's a do I really trust you? [...] because I could lose my accommodation, I could lose my benefits [...] I think there's a quite rightly a big distrust and especially for people who experience street homelessness (TA Provider).

> [...] if the issue is that they've run out of electricity on their card, [...] they're not sure how they're going to get their washing done or even get their food or even open the can of beans if you haven't got a tin opener, you know, coming along to a meeting or even the worry of moving on [...] So those are the real barriers to joining a group like this (Voluntary Sector worker).

There is also the challenge of having a high number of people in UTA, making the feedback process difficult to manage and of limited value when very few respond. For example, one housing provider in Hastings has 250–280 people staying there:

> If only one person feeds back in the TAAG you're talking a very low percentage. So therefore, how much value do you put on their comments when it's such a small percentage (TA provider).

Furthermore, to try and address the challenges around trust and fear of speaking out because of the risk of punitive treatment, a worker in the East Sussex voluntary sector suggests,

> There might be a separate group that people with lived experience in TA at the time could share their views and then somebody brings them to the TAAG separately.

A good example of this in practice is in the learning from Manchester homelessness partnership toolkit which reads, "Prior to the Action Group two Justlife staff members facilitate informal meetings to engage current and past residents of UTA" (Homeless Link, 2017, p. 12). This provides residents with a safe space to discuss matters around UTA and directly feeds into and shapes the UTA Action Group meetings. These informal meetings are also used to feedback key points from the UTA Action Group meetings to residents of UTA who may not feel comfortable attending a formal meeting. Two representatives from these informal meetings attend the quarterly UTA Action Group to represent UTA residents (Homeless Link, 2017). Following this model, the East Sussex TAAG could seek new TAAG members with lived experience to lead a sub-group of UTA current or past residents.

Facilitating learning

The multi-agency approach of the TAAG provides a network structure to improve the experiences of homeless households by bringing together TA stakeholders in East Sussex (Gosmann *et al.*, 2020) and moving away from working in silos. While this new way of working has significant benefits in terms of increased comprehensive decision-making, it can also challenge expectations towards more traditional approaches and results (Keast *et al.*, 2004). Our research, through interviews detailed in this section, found that the TAAG's multi-agency approach has facilitated learning towards a trauma-informed approach to help sustain tenancies and reduce evictions, improve standards, create awareness and think strategically. There have, nonetheless, been some challenges in terms of different expectations around information sharing, keeping the focus on the client and competition between TA providers.

Sustaining tenancies, reducing evictions and improving standards

There was a common view that the TAAG as a network had built positive relationships between TA providers, local authorities and services. In turn, this was perceived to help

sustain placements, reduce the risk of rough sleeping, reduce the risk of unsafe accommodation and identify new areas for improvement. As a Voluntary Sector worker explained learning and networking enabled,

[...] a trauma informed approach [...] rather than just "one strike you're out'' [approach].

A TA provider confirmed,

[...] in some temporary accommodations it has helped people experiencing multiple disadvantage sustain their placement.

Contacts made with drug and alcohol services had been a "game changer" for TA providers, as in their experience, people using substances were the most likely to fail their tenancies. This was also observed in the Brighton & Hove TAAG by a Voluntary Sector representative,

[...] after we'd been running it a year or so, there was quite a marked reduction in evictions from temporary accommodation [...] the Council themselves put it in their paper to the Housing committee that it was as a result of the temporary accommodation actually being improved, that the numbers of people being evicted had gone down. But it's hard to [...] pinpoint why that was, [...] certainly a much better working relationship between landlords and services and the Council and services.

These improved relationships could not have happened outside the TAAG network. However, for some newer TA providers or those not attending the TAAG, training from local authorities has been essential to take them through all the health and safety checks, procurement process and service specifications. As a local housing authority representative explained,

I think that for me the biggest difference has been in the training of people because the Temporary accommodation field is completely unregulated.

There have been some challenges around competition between more experienced TA providers who may be reluctant to share their improvements with the new providers; as a local housing authority worker commented,

[...] there is an element of competitiveness between them as businesses because [...] some of them are very well developed in terms of their policies and procedures and safeguarding.

From the local authority's perspective, learning needs to be shared with TA providers who are less aware (and less trauma-informed). This challenge could be overcome if more TA providers attended the TAAG to form part of a more established network, learning from others and making new contacts.

Creating awareness and thinking strategically

A strong presence of services has helped keep the client at the centre of thinking for all agencies at the TAAG. As a local housing authority worker reflected,

It's really easy particularly for councils and the TA providers almost to sometimes lose sight of the client.

Increased awareness has led to some important projects, including the creation of a services directory made available to guests during their stay and re-writing of the accommodation rules to avoid threatening wording about eviction procedures. As a Services provider explained,

The service directory [...] was quite a quick piece of work but can have quite a big impact as well – to upskill staff to help them better accommodate people with multiple disadvantages.

Services have become more accessible for guests, often meeting at their accommodation.

"Professionals working together [...] using those units of accommodation [...] as a focal point, in a meeting, has been really helpful for clients as well because it makes their help and everything that they're able to access that much more accessible", explained a local authority representative.

This change directly benefits people experiencing multiple disadvantage who may struggle to attend appointments, with mental and physical health problems or disabilities.

The TAAG has enabled further strategic thinking about local, regional and national issues. For local health services, the TAAG "helped [them] understand the landscape better" with regard to their previous health work in UTA with a bordering local authority. Potentially, this increased understanding about UTA in East Sussex could help inform people who may be placed outside their area from bordering authorities. Regionally, as a local authority representative explained, local authorities had been able to connect across different authorities at an operational level through the TAAG,

> [...] because it spans across East Sussex, it's quite helpful to have their additional input, [...] because at my level that's quite a useful tool of communication.

Nationally, the TAAG had provided local authorities with an opportunity to explain to services the impact of new legislation, such as the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, as a local authority representative pointed out,

> [legislation changes] for example like with the Domestic Abuse Acts that came in this year [...], it's kind of helpful to be able to make services aware of the changes.

Nurturing change

Throughout interviews with key participants, references were made to initiatives and ideas being explored by the TAAG, which were all presented as ways to improve UTA provision and standards. Some interviewees shared a view that these new initiatives had either come from, or were aided, by the TAAG. A local authority representative emphasised how the TAAG was able to:

> [...] [carry out] targeted pieces of work that we as a Council wouldn't have had the resource or [...] just wouldn't have had the staffing capacity to do so, that's been really, really helpful.

The Standards Charter

One important initiative viewed positively by most was the Temporary Accommodation Charter, which arose from research carried out in 2018 by Eastbourne CAB into people's experiences of living in TA. The Charter represents a formal commitment between the local authority and TA providers to support residents to move out of homelessness (East Sussex TAAG, 2019). The potential impact was recognised by TAAG members,

> We felt that even a few of those things in the Charter, if they were applied would make a huge difference to some or all the people living in the accommodation (Services representative).

> Our report went to the Health and Wellbeing Board and one of the key recommendations was about the implementation of the Temporary Accommodation Charter which would facilitate better access to healthcare and practical necessities for those people in accommodation (Voluntary Sector representative).

The Charter has provided a focal point to rally support (Homeless Link, 2017), across different interests including the Voluntary Sector, health services, private landlords and local

authorities. Brighton and Hove City Council has recently agreed to include higher quality standards in their contracts with TA providers aligned to the Charter.

TA providers engaged with the East Sussex TAAG felt the Charter should be widely adopted across the local area:

> The quality of the accommodation is all up to a minimum spec now. I absolutely am on board with that, and I think we need to get that in as soon as possible [talking about the Charter] because I think all TA providers should be providing a certain level of accommodation (TA Provider).

Some interviewees considered that existing legislations already captured standards set out in the Charter, while others felt more scrutiny of providers was needed.

> I think it is a really helpful document to kind of focus on what the sort of temporary accommodation standards can aspire to be, but for me […] we really work stringently to the HHSOS system, which is a health and safety rating system […]. So, for me that charter […] it's a bit of a replication […] we don't need to duplicate because we've got something that works very effectively anyway (Local authority representative).

> Rogue landlords out there, these providers you know where you hear the horror stories and that perhaps don't meet the Charter that we've developed (TA provider).

Involving other TA providers who were not performing so well in the TAAG was recommended as a way to improve standards in line with the Charter. Recognising that significant changes take time to adopt, involving more TA providers could help change attitudes, create more awareness and build stronger relationships with local authorities.

Women-only safe temporary accommodation

Systems change has been driven through conversations in the TAAG. This includes TAAG meetings where discussions have highlighted the need for opening women-only safe accommodation spaces due to the challenges faced by women in the current housing context. For example, large mixed accommodation spaces can be triggering and unsuitable for many women, especially women experiencing multiple disadvantage and those who have experienced DA. Furthermore, it was highlighted that the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 has introduced new statutory duties on local authorities to provide housing for survivors of DA. However, the challenge of trying to find move-on accommodation and support from Emergency and Temporary accommodation for DA survivors proves difficult when there seems to be a housing shortage.

East Sussex County Council's housing team are working closely with the Rough Sleeping Initiative team to look at extending respite housing for women experiencing multiple disadvantage who are fleeing DA. There is a new funding bid with an emphasis on partnership working to find new housing solutions and provide support. An example of this is working in partnership with FLSE and Brighton Women's Centre on an initiative that was sparked through TAAG contacts,

> We […] are looking at opening up a new Women's-only unit of Temporary Accommodation, […] a development that's been really helpful, and that's definitely been as a result of the TAAG (Local authority representative).

In addition, an East Sussex Temporary Accommodation provider who is part of the TAAG has been working on a project to open five respite rooms for women fleeing DA. The accommodation includes a live-in full-time support manager. The Council is also recruiting five dedicated employees to support 12 women-only placements into Temporary Accommodation in East Sussex, such as these respite rooms. However, the challenge to all of this is the cost.

Everybody thinks it's a fantastic project. But at the end of the day, somebody needs to fund it, and if the Council can't get funding it just can't happen, so they are the challenges (TA Provider).

Information-sharing initiative

One initiative which was widely mentioned by interviewees was an information-sharing protocol between local authorities and TA providers. Discussions brought out some challenges around reconciling legal responsibilities, data protection compliance and enabling the exchange of personal information. There were differing views about why the initiative had stalled, ranging from an unwillingness to share information, competing statutory responsibilities and the complexities of large systems.

[…] this is just you know, stuck in the long grass, and seems relatively straightforward (Voluntary Sector representative).

[…] at the beginning of the TAAG we were looking at developing an information sharing protocol with TA providers which actually sounds straightforward, but is actually quite a massive piece of work because we have to involve all of our legal team and data protection leads (Local authority representative).

Despite slow progress, several interviewees reflected that discussions in the TAAG had helped raise awareness for local housing authorities to improve the process and build good relations with TA providers. As a Voluntary Sector worker commented about this initiative,

I think the awareness is there with local housing authorities now to try and improve that process.

Future concerns

Lack of resources, time and financial constraints were identified as limitations on the TAAG's work. Tensions between high demand for TA and significant local authority cuts have meant that Councils are,

[…] working under such significant pressure to try and kind of maintain a baseline service (Local authority representative).

Exacerbated by the pandemic, a Voluntary Sector worker reported that local authorities were,

[…] placing people with MCN wherever possible during high demand and not thinking about the Charter or support needs.

Cost-reduction was the main focus for some Councils as a TA provider vouched,

[…] they just want the cheapest possible accommodation, whilst other Councils did value higher standards provided. Funding of projects through TA Providers has meant that development work is limited, such as women-specific spaces in UTA, and a need for change was identified.

There was some concern over how the TAAG's work would be resourced after June 2022, when the Fulfilling Lives programme comes to an end.

However, the East Sussex TAAG has provided a forum to discuss UTA issues and funding. For example, Children's Services highlighted a recent rise in housing referrals for households that had been evicted without recourse to public funds as they were deemed "intentionally" homeless (East Sussex TAAG, 2021). Further pressure was expected with the government's announcement that the minimum notice period on rental properties would be halved, returning to pre-pandemic legislation (MHCLG, 2021). Funding bids had been made to central government, and through TAAG contacts, local authorities worked with TA providers to accommodate new pressures.

One suggestion made was for Councillors holding the housing budget to attend TAAGs and discuss funding partnerships with TA providers to assist with existing pressures as well as new developments. Furthermore, the importance of using experts with lived experience was highlighted to ensure new projects were appropriately co-designed and implemented. While some East Sussex TAAG members were open to the idea of expanding TAAG membership, others were concerned about losing the focus and increasing competition between TA providers. For local authorities, however, the real issue may be around their resourcing and capacity to manage new projects which new membership might bring. To avoid loss of focus and help channel competition, the key to increasing capacity seems to lie in encouraging budget-holders and key decision makers to attend the TAAG. This could help attract new membership from other local authorities and new TA providers to share resources, learning and financial funding.

Conclusion

While there is no linear approach to systems change, as Meadows (2009) emphasises, there are certain factors which can encourage and shape change. We have argued that the ways in which FLSE has approached the East Sussex TAAG have supported and influenced change to improve UTA and hidden homelessness for people experiencing multiple disadvantage. In this case study, we have explored the ways in which the East Sussex TAAG can create systems change by providing a collaborative and democratic space, equalising partners involved, facilitating learning and nurturing change. Common goals have crystallised through the formation of the TAAG as a multi-agency group. With a powerful presence of services, the TAAG has kept the client at the centre of its thinking for all agencies. However, involving lived experience voices would strengthen this person-centred approach and help generate further solutions and initiatives based on real-life experiences. The TAAG has built on the positive elements of the UTA system by creating a network of people who can work together to improve UTA and find solutions to common problems faced.

We have argued that this approach to systems change through a TAAG has led to some significant steps forward. For example, the proposal for a Temporary Accommodation Charter, training opportunities for TA providers and their staff, as well as women-only safe Temporary Accommodation. While the information-sharing initiative has been more difficult to progress, especially in the context of the pandemic, it has highlighted areas for improvement and supported changes in processes for new people entering UTA.

As the private rented sector continues to grow nationally, UTA is expected to remain a substantial aspect of the housing system for people facing multiple disadvantage (Iafrati, 2021). With this in mind, the East Sussex TAAG is a practical way in which local agencies involved in the housing system can explore change and improve standards by collaborating with different agencies. As such, local authorities would benefit from being involved in the TAAG, particularly budget holders or Commissioners with the capacity to create partnerships with the private and voluntary sectors to fund and resource new initiatives. Involving lived experience voices in the TAAG needs to be a priority, ensuring changes make a real difference. Representatives might come from the organisations already involved to lead and engage people staying in UTA. Finally, this study indicates that adoption of the Temporary Accommodation Charter by local authorities across East Sussex with standards incorporated into contracts with TA providers could directly benefit people experiencing multiple disadvantage while staying in UTA. The Charter has the potential to help regulate the quality of UTA and improve the journey out of homelessness for people experiencing multiple disadvantage.

Limitations and further research

One limitation of this study was the relatively small-scale research. While the research does not intend to be generalisable, it does nonetheless highlight some issues which are of general interest and relevance to other local authorities and organisations seeking to improve UTA.

Further research into comparative case studies of other TAAGs or similar organisations would offer different insights into how TAAGs have sought to improve UTA. One potential area of interest would be a study of introducing and implementing a Standards Charter for UTA. This could serve as both a practical guide and an important point of comparison for key stakeholders in other locations seeking to negotiate implementation of Charter standards into local authority housing contracts. Building on this research could have the potential to create a TAAG model for adaptation in different locations and also give existing TAAGs insight into how to progress important local initiatives.

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