



Understanding the relationship between mental health and bedsits in a seaside town

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Introduction

This research has taken place as part of a joint project between Tendring District Council and the School of Health and Human Sciences at the University of Essex.

The project developed out of growing concerns that vulnerable people residing in bedsit accommodation had needs that were not being addressed. As a result they were becoming increasingly marginalised with possible negative affects on their health, especially their mental health, resulting in significant costs for statutory services and emergency care. Locally there were also concerns that the presence of growing numbers of bedsits in certain parts of the town in which the study was carried out, were negatively

effecting the local community and impacting on local businesses and the tourism trade. Anti-social behaviour, crime, street drinking and street safety were identified as being particular challenges in relation to some of the bedsit properties in the locality.

This report looks at the experiences of bedsit residents in a seaside town and how living in a bedsit has impacted on their wellbeing and mental health specifically. It also looks at how the bedsits are managed using data from interviews with landlords. Lastly, the difficulties of accessing other types of housing and the importance of bedsits in meeting future housing need are considered.



Mental health in the research area

The incidence of mental health problems in North East Essex is lower than both the East of England and national averages. However, the town in which the study was carried out stands out as an anomaly, having a prevalence of mental health problems that is much greater than the East of England and national average (Tolchard and Speed 2010). Additionally Tendring, the district in which the town is located, has the highest rate of residents claiming incapacity benefit due to mental illness in Essex (Turning Point 2010).

A Mental Health Needs Assessment for the town specifically mentions bedsit accommodation. Firstly they point out that there should be better after care

when clients are discharged from hospital. It suggests that there should be 'more day services, supported working programmes, inclusion in local activities with support and self help groups' (Tolchard and Speed 2010: 25). The assessment specifically identifies bedsits as being potentially problematic for residents who have mental health problems: 'Many of these houses [bedsits] provide a safe environment and a place to stay until the person is able to find their feet. However, many are simply 'dumping grounds' [their emphasis] for some of the most vulnerable members of a community' (ibid: 44). This report tackles this issue directly by exploring the experiences of vulnerable bedsit residents.



The research

How did we carry out this research?

The research was designed to: find out about people's experiences of living in bedsits, including the impact it has had on their mental health; to find out how they came to live there; and to identify which local services they engaged with. The data was collected during in-depth interviews with 19 current bedsit residents and an additional two respondents who had lived in bedsits until very recently. Respondents were recruited through agencies in the town which support vulnerable adults, as well as through one landlord and one managing agent who were themselves interviewed.

All respondents took part in at least one interview. Six respondents were also given disposable cameras to take pictures of where they live and the services they use. Some of these photos feature in this report.

How did bedsit residents come to be living there?

Seventy five per cent of Tendring residents live in owner occupied accommodation, 13 per cent in the private rented sector and eight percent in social rented housing (Fordham Research 2008). There is however a concentration of privately rented accommodation in the middle of the town with 79 bedsit properties in the central ward. But as a percentage of total housing the proportion that are bedsits is significantly lower than other seaside resorts such as Margate, Hastings or Blackpool (Smith 2012).

Each respondent had a unique set of circumstances which led to them residing in a bedsit. However, there were some key themes that emerged. Below are summaries of three pathways to give a sense of the differences in people's journeys:

Tony's father left when he was a young child. He was brought up by his mother in Essex but they had a difficult relationship and he left home aged 15. He spent time sofa surfing and started taking drugs and drinking alcohol. He spent some time in jail and on his release wanted to go to a new area to prevent him getting in trouble again. He also couldn't afford housing where he previously lived. He came to the town and lived in a bedsit property which he disliked due to the behaviour of other tenants. He has since moved to another bedsit where he is much happier because it is cheaper, better quality and in a more central location.

“ Best thing I ever did move [here]... cause if I was back [there] I'd be back on crack, I'd do something wrong, I'm a changed person if you know what I mean. ”

Tony, aged 30

John grew up in a council house in the midlands, had a good relationship with his parents and was popular at school. He went on to get a good job. Following the death of his mother and acting as a carer for his father he started to drink heavily. Following the death of his father he needed a fresh start. He sold his parents home and after a period of living in small hotels in different places he moved to the town where he initially lived in a caravan and then, when money became short, he moved into a series of different bedsits. He suffered from enduring mental health problems which developed after the death of his mother but is now settled in a property he is happy in, that is suited to his needs and is feeling more optimistic about life.

“ So I sold the house, got quite a bit... so we went to Brighton for a month, living in small hotels... we would then move somewhere else... [then] there was an advert in one of the Sunday papers for 'buy your own holiday home' and it happened to be here. ”

John, aged 56



Before coming to the town Mark lived in a privately rented self contained property with his girlfriend. Two years before the interview he lost his job and this led to the breakdown of his relationship. He moved out and went to stay with friends in the town and spent a few months sofa surfing. He found it difficult to find work and ended up living in his car. When he could no longer afford to run his car he moved into a bedsit. Although he felt he was quite fortunate to have found a reasonable property with a good landlady he was finding it very difficult to adjust to his new circumstances.

“...basically I found myself, from what most people describe as a ‘usual life’ and having a partner and a house, to sleeping with most of my clothes in the back of the car... it’s quite surprising how quickly things can go down hill.”

Mark, aged 39



Men often reported having to move into bedsit accommodation following relationship breakdown. The women and children remained in the family home forcing them to seek alternative accommodation. One of the women also cited relationship breakdown as a factor in her move into a bedsit. It was also common for respondents to be directed or placed in bedsit accommodation following release from prison. The low cost of bedsit accommodation, the low requirements of landlords in terms of deposits and references and the willingness of landlords to accept housing benefit were important factors in why people lived in bedsit accommodation.

What were people’s experiences of living in bedsits?

Peoples' experiences of living in bedsits were very varied. The management of the property appeared to be an important reason for respondents' different experiences although the behaviour of other tenants was also important. The majority of respondents reported having witnessed, heard or being anxious of violence whilst living in a bedsit property or complained about the frequency of drug and alcohol use amongst tenants. Another important issue was stigma

and the belief that they were looked down upon because of where they lived. Reports of theft were also common. Some respondents felt their possessions were not safe in their rooms when they went out. One vulnerable respondent reported being abused by other house mates who frequently stole from her or 'borrowed' money which was never paid back. However, tenants who lived in properties that had CCTV had a variety of reactions to it – some felt much more secure whilst others felt they were being spied on.

The challenge of sharing facilities with other people was also mentioned. Respondents complained that other tenants left kitchens and bathrooms untidy and dirty, which meant they had to clean them

“So why did you come [here]?”

“That is where they found me to go from prison.”

David, aged 36

before they could be used. The noise of other tenants also caused problems for many respondents. This included things like being able to hear their neighbours' TV and radio as well as slamming doors, washing machines and being woken up to allow guests into the property at night. One respondent said that it was difficult for him to get any 'quiet time' which had caused him to become anxious and stressed.

But it was not all bad. Some respondents reported positive experiences of living in a bedsit. Most commonly mentioned was the sense of community within the property. This included friendships with other tenants as well as good relationships with the property landlord or caretaker. Several respondents gave examples of the property landlord or caretaker going beyond the call of duty, being a listening ear, offering to get shopping and helping in activities such as filling out benefit forms.

The presence of a live in landlord or manager seemed particularly important for making residents feel safe and in the rapid resolution of problems with other tenants. There was evidence that, when managed well, bedsit properties can offer a good housing option for more vulnerable tenants due to the close proximity of other people.

Additionally, the flexibility and low cost of bedsit accommodation helped a working respondent to manage the cost of housing and still be able to budget for trips to visit his son and have a social life. Low cost housing options are therefore important for people in low paid full time work who struggle to afford self contained accommodation.



“ I don't like telling people that I live round here, live in Hall Road, cause its obvious people are going to look at me, like, you know – I'm going to steal something from them or I'm going to sit outside drinking all day you know?... I give my address... and they look at you and give you a bit of a dirty look. ”

Adam, aged 23

How did bedsit residents get on with their landlords?

Residents reported having a wide range of experiences with landlords. The most common complaint about landlords was the lack of urgency they had in dealing with complaints. Even where the landlord was liked this issue was still mentioned. Not being able to contact the landlord was another common issue. The 'top ups' charged by landlords on top of the housing benefit were also unpopular. One respondent reported having to move several times due to the poor property management of several landlords, which led to tenants having to move out so that repairs could be completed.

Several respondents described poor landlords who neglected properties resulting in dangerous hazards. Action by the local authority against poor landlords led to one respondent having to move several times as the landlord was not willing to complete the work requested with the tenant in occupation.

When landlords and managing agents were liked it was because they were seen as fair, caring and going the extra mile. This included finding more suitable accommodation for tenants in the building if their needs changed – if they could no longer walk upstairs for example, being flexible about rent and deposits was also appreciated.

“

If there's no respect, you've got no hope of managing the building...you've gone out your way...that goes a long way and the person will, in turn, assist you. If you say, 'please turn the music down' there won't be a big argument.... And just [that] can make a huge difference to everyone's life.

HMO Manager

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What did the landlords say?

The main problem landlords reported was choosing the right tenants. Due to the nature of bedsit properties, the shared facilities and close living arrangements, just one tenant can disturb the whole building which can cause good tenants to leave. Choosing tenants that were recommended by current tenants was one of the ways they reduced this risk. One landlord chose to keep his rents low so they were affordable to low paid workers because he didn't accept tenants on housing benefit.

When tenants caused problems landlords reported having difficulties tackling the issues that arose. The length of time it takes to evict tenants legally was mentioned as being particularly problematic and costly. It left them feeling powerless to deal with the issues caused by difficult tenants.

Some landlords also reported finding the council difficult to deal with both with regards to environmental health and housing benefit. Two landlords felt the gateposts were frequently moved with regards to the management regulations and that there was a lack of transparency in the housing benefit system. However some landlords had established

“

The landlady is fantastic... she's not banging on my door if some housing benefit payments are late because she understands the situation.

Mark, aged 39

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positive relationships with both sections of the council resulting in better outcomes for tenants and landlords.

Another challenge landlords reported was collecting 'top up' – the additional rent that tenants have to pay to cover the difference between the local housing allowance that determines the housing benefit they receive and the rent. One landlord that had many tenants on housing benefit didn't see the point in raising rents because top ups were so time consuming to collect.

Finally, landlords reported that although they recognised that some of their tenants had experienced problems – including those related to mental health issues, learning difficulties and drug and alcohol addiction they were unsure of where to go for help. The problems arising from these tenancies therefore often resulted in eviction.

Why can't people access self-contained accommodation?

Price was the most important reason that people accessed bedsit accommodation. Not only were monthly rents cheaper and covered by housing benefit but deposits were small, if required at all. Apart from one interviewee all those interviewed were housing benefit claimants. Having to find a landlord that accepted housing benefit limited the properties that they could access and increased their chances of residing in bedsit accommodation. The low rental prices in the town compared with larger towns nearby, helped to attract people to the town. People also experienced problems when contact with services such as probation or social care for care leavers was terminated as additional assistance they were given with regards to deposits or rent were stopped.

What was the link between bedsits and mental health?

For some respondents, living in a bedsit had positively affected their mental health. The friendships that had developed while living there, both with other tenants as well as the landlord or caretaker, had positively impacted upon their wellbeing. This had resulted in them feeling happier and boosted their self-esteem. However, it was more common for respondents to report increased levels of stress and anxiety whilst living in a bedsits. Frequently this was due to the behaviour of other tenants in the property. Many examples were given of violence within the property or in the vicinity, theft and drug and alcohol abuse.

However the mental wellbeing of some respondents had been negatively affected by events in their life before moving to the property. The majority of respondents moved in to a bedsit following a negative event in their life for example job loss, having been in prison, death of a family member or mental illness. Very few respondents felt that they had a choice over where they were living. It is therefore very difficult to pick out exactly what is due to a persons housing situation rather than other aspects of their life.

But it was clear that the absence of stable housing, in which they felt safe, prevented them from addressing other issues and could potentially worsen their state of mind. Additionally, respondents found it difficult living in close proximity to lots of other people with similar problems to their own.



“ They [the landlord] need a personal guarantor. Finding someone who lives in the UK that's earning over a certain amount a year [£15,000], to do that for you is difficult. ”

David, aged 36





Conclusion

This research focused on the experiences of vulnerable adults living in bedsit accommodation. It has shown that experiences in bedsits are mixed but that negative experiences, which were common, significantly affect the mental wellbeing of residents. These led to stress and anxiety, contributing to conditions such as depression, and making it harder for individuals trying to overcome drug or alcohol addiction. On the other hand, living in accommodation that felt safe and was suited to the needs of the individual and their budget, boosted self esteem and reduced housing related stress. Many of the problems arising from bedsit life arose not from the building itself but from the behaviour of other tenants. The most positive experiences of living in bedsit accommodation came from the sense of community that developed in the better managed properties.

The research also shows that the management of bedsit properties can significantly alter the experience of tenants living in them. Therefore, good landlords and managers that are reliable, accessible to tenants, and who effectively deal with any problematic behaviour from tenants, appear crucial to avoiding possible harm.

Bedsits fill an important housing need and should not automatically be labelled as bad housing. Demand for this type of property is likely to grow among people that are working, not just among those who are unemployed as rents and demand in the private rented sector increase. Attempts to effectively manage the impact of bedsit properties needs to include ensuring effective local management including a clear understanding of market demand and the processes that give rise to bedsit properties becoming established. Simply trying to limit their spread may actually make it more difficult to cope with local housing demand.

This research focused on the experiences of vulnerable bedsit tenants. Although not everyone that lives in a bedsit is vulnerable this research has identified that there is significant unmet need amongst this population with particular need reported by both tenants and landlords for low level support with basic living skills, protection against abuse and assistance with activities such as benefit claims. Some individuals in receipt of care from mental health services also raised concerns about the level of care that they were receiving.



What can be done locally?

Since the research started local service providers have been taking action in tackling some of the issues raised in this paper. The Private Sector Housing Section at the District Council has become increasingly proactive in the management of bedsit properties. Local voluntary organisations and churches are working together more closely to provide services for vulnerable people in the town many of whom live in bedsit accommodation.

There are several ways that the negative impact of bedsits can be minimised:

- Organise drop in services for key agencies in some of the larger HMO properties, this would involve getting landlords to work much more closely with local services so that those services are made more visible in bedsit properties. This could also be through the use of posters and information provision.
- An information pack for landlords on local services that are available to their tenants would be useful. Landlords were frequently faced with issues that they felt unqualified to deal with.
- Stronger relationships between agencies, particularly the District Council and private rented sector landlords, would assist in efficient move on into appropriate long term accommodation.
- Good models of bedsit management need to be documented and landlords educated in the management of bedsit properties. This will help to minimise the risks to bedsit tenants and also limit the impact of bedsit properties within the communities in which they are based.
- It also became clear during this research that significant pressure is being placed in the centre of the town with regard to demand for bedsit accommodation. This comes from prison discharges, probation and other single homeless referrals being directed to the town. This is a strategic housing matter that is now being taken up by the District Council who are working partnership with a range of agencies at the county level to find more appropriate housing solutions.

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All names of people and roads have been changed. The photos used in this booklet were taken by the participants themselves.



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