How policy affects housing issues

Narrator: After talking to Chris I decided to find out more about how social research was done in a policy making context. So I’ve now just come across London on the tube. I’m at Old Street Station in Finsbury, East Central 1. And I’m just about to walk up to Shelter to talk to one of the members of the Policy Unit there, Lila Baker.

Lila, as a member of the Policy Unit for Shelter, the National Campaign for Homeless People, could you tell us about the ways in which you investigate housing issues, and homelessness?

LB: The research that Shelter carries out is planned at different layers. The first layer, and perhaps most obvious, is the policy research that we do, to inform policy development. We then carry out what we might call ‘thematical research’ projects. Which address a topic of theme that is perhaps more accessible to the general public. And an example of this is our homelessness costs research and campaign. Which was carried out over the past few years. And investigated the different social and economic costs of homelessness and bad housing. And finally we have more if you like technical research. Which looks perhaps in more theoretical way at the housing issues. And the best example of that currently would be sheltered housing investment research. Overall these various research projects embrace qualitative and quantitative research methods. Which is important not only for research reasons, but also because these kinds of research can appeal to difference audiences. And in addition to that some of our research will be very short term and others will be carried out on a longer timetable.

Narrator: Do you find that you collect different sorts of evidence when you engage in qualitative research, from when you look at say survey material?

LB: Qualitative research certainly at Shelter is very important in investigating the reasons behind homelessness and the real experience of homelessness and bad housing. And trying to develop a very thorough understanding of what it is to be homeless or poorly housed. Quantitative research is actually much more difficult for an organisation like Shelter with fewer resources. Because it is difficult to amass the amount of data necessary to draw real statistical material from it.

Narrator: When we think of homelessness, we often have a visual image of people sleeping on pavements and in doorways. The stereotype I suppose, a figure of the homeless man. Has your work led you to question that image?

LB: Certainly my work both before working for Shelter, when I was in housing practice, and my work here at Shelter has led me to question the image of somebody sleeping in a doorway. Shelter defines as homeless a person who is without accommodation, which is affordable. Of adequate size and design. In good repair. Which is safe, secure and provides support when it’s required. And that’s a very clear definition that we work to. Both in our campaign work and also in our research. Shelter’s research programme is intended to cover the whole of Shelter’s definition of homelessness and bad housing. With the overall aim of increasing awareness and improving understanding of homelessness and bad housing issues.

The best example I can give of perhaps a recent project, which achieved that coverage in a simple and accessible way, is a report called ‘Divided Lives’. Which looked at households who are forced to live apart because they don’t have suitable accommodation in which to live.
in altogether. And that research embraced a range of household types, and also illustrated the full range of homelessness and housing problems that we’re concerned with.

Narrator: Now a great deal of your work involves building up a comprehensive profile of the background and characteristics of homeless people. How do you collect this kind of evidence? What methods do you use?

LB: I think the main message is that in homelessness you have to be creative. Going to the most obvious source is not always the best way to find the information that you need. Particularly when we’re talking about households and people living on the margins of society. We have a project currently underway looking at the risks of home ownership, which is making use of the labour force survey. Not only is that good practice using existing data sets. It’s also extremely valuable to Shelter which has limited resources to obtain that breadth of numerical information.

We did publish some research a couple of years ago called ‘Go Home and Rest’. Which established a health profile of single homeless people using accident and emergency departments. That was a unique data set, which we could never have achieved without working in partnership with the University College Hospital. It was an extraordinary opportunity for an organisation like us. and the information that came out of it was very very valuable.

Shelter does as a charity benefit from goodwill, and we do try to foster that as much as we can.

Narrator: Have you encountered any difficulties when trying to find out about the lives of homeless people?

LB: Homelessness is a very difficult experience and unpleasant experience for many people. And for some, it can be traumatic. If you’re trying to speak to somebody who is homeless about their experience whilst they are currently homeless, they have an enormous layer of pressures to resolve their practical difficulties. And responding to a researcher is not going to be their top priority. Many homeless people feel that they receive poor treatment or lack of respect from the organisations they approach for assistance. And certainly for us an organisation, we would not want to add to those feelings. And it’s therefore important to treat research respondents with respect and to show how valuable their time and efforts in helping us with our research are.

We’ve developed a set of guidelines for agencies who might put us in touch with homeless people, and for homeless people themselves. About how we carry out research interviews. And these cover a range of issues from ensuring that informed consent has been given by the individual concerned. Through having control over where interviews take place. How they’re conducted. What time of day. Whether they’re taped. Interviewees are also asked whether they wish to check transcripts. Check case study material produced as a result of the research. And finally, it’s made very clear to them on a number of occasions before the interview itself takes place, that they can drop out at any stage, even during an interview. That they can ask for an interview to be halted. Take breaks. Ask for the material not to be used, and so on.

Narrator: Do you find that it’s quite difficult to manage being sensitive to the needs of the people you are studying. At the same time being in an organisation which is trying to publicise their existence, their experiences, in order to persuade say government agencies to do something about the issue of homelessness?

LB: The best way to describe those difficulties is a healthy tension. Which exists between researchers, policy analysts, press officers, campaigners within the organisation. Who do have very different aims. But who will ultimately share the same set of beliefs and principles. And I think it’s those principles and beliefs and shared aims which enables the organisation to come to agreements about how to handle various kinds of information.
For example, a researcher can easily anonymise a case study. A press officer may need a face and a name in order to attract media attention. And there’s a clear difference in the way we work. But I think it’s those aims and principles and beliefs which make us able to agree at the end of the day.

We do talk to different audiences in different ways. Just to give you an example of perhaps different parts of our organisation. We produce a research report. The Policy Unit might produce a quite detailed and perhaps quite technical briefing for ministers who we know are specifically interested in that topic. The Press Office will produce a Summary for the media, making the research accessible and showing how it will be an interesting and timely story. And the Campaigns Office might for example write a letter to specific MPs who are known to be interested in the subject. So once we have the Research Report, there are various products outputs that come from that.

Narrator: Do you find that the way that you’ve done your work actually changes once it’s put in the newspapers?

LB: It’s essential that the messages from the researcher delivered in if you like bite sized chunks. And clearly if one has worked for a very long time on a piece of research, to see that reduced to a series of very simplified points, can be frustrating. But once again it’s about doing research in a campaign context and working towards a common goal. And whilst it may be frustrating not to see the caveats clarified or the intricacies of the argument explored. The goal of trying to increase awareness of homelessness and bad housing, and improve the situation of homeless people and poorly housed people is an important enough goal to make that okay, at the end of the day.

Narrator: Since your work is clearly part of the political process, do you think this affects the way that you’re finding are understood by these different audiences? In terms of the impact they have.

LB: I think to a certain extent that’s a question about how Shelter is perceived. Certainly speaking as a member of staff within Shelter, I would say that we have projects which are carried out for the specific intention of raising public awareness of homelessness and bad housing. And that’s all they’re there to do. And we try to keep our research programme very separate from those exercises. So that the research programme fairly examines both sides of the argument and tries to come out with a balanced and moderate conclusion.

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