

## 4.2 Local Housing Provision Case Study

The following data was obtained from interviews with key housing workers in the statutory and voluntary sector and from a survey of housing associations' provision.

### Data from Interviews

Interviews were conducted with key workers in Reading Borough Council's Housing Department: the Homelessness Unit, Housing Allocations and Housing Advice. The following information was obtained:

- The 1996 Housing Act did not refer to or include sexual identity (or the issues and needs of young bisexuals, gays and lesbians) in its either its definition of homelessness (Section 175 of the Act) or its definition of priority need (Section 185). Consequently, these provisions were open to interpretations by local authorities and housing workers.
- In the case of Reading Borough Council, they *would* consider sexual identity as a contributory factor in a young person's homelessness, they *would* consider it as a factor in the young person's priority need, but they *would not* consider a young person coming out as an act of intentional homelessness.
- Progressive as the above positions are, they are based solely on workers' interpretation. There was no guidance in Reading Borough Council's Housing Directorate's Standard Operating Procedures about sexual identity and legislation.
- In terms of housing allocations, a points system operated but sexual identity was not specifically addressed. The worker did not know whether Reading Borough Council offered joint tenancies to same-sex couples and did not know whether they operated rights of succession. Again, there was no guidance in the Housing Directorate's Standard Operating Procedures about these matters.
- Housing Advice had a 'homophobia' entry on its database and had dealt with five cases of homophobia over the four years the database had been operational. There had been 3,983 service users and of these 60 per cent had been women, 20 per cent had been Asian or Black and 21 per cent had been aged under-25. The cases of homophobia included:

Case 1: A lesbian couple who had been living with parents who had been asked to leave. They had been looking for private rented accommodation but had experienced homophobia from landlords.

Case 2: A lesbian couple, staying with friends, looking for accommodation. They had experienced homophobic abuse from neighbours.

Case 3: A gay man who had lost his job because of homophobia and was homeless.

Case 4: A gay man living in a hostel who had experienced homophobia.

Case 5: A gay man who was living in Council accommodation who had experienced homophobia from other residents.

- None of these housing workers had not heard about Section 28 and had received no specific guidance on the issue. In fact, more senior officers had instructed them not to answer any of the author's questions on this matter prior to the interviews.
- None of these housing workers had received any *specific* training around bisexual, gay and lesbian issues and needs.
- The Reading Unified Monitoring System (RUMS) established in 1994 by the Special Housing Needs Forum to provide a comprehensive picture of the level and nature of single homelessness did not ask about, nor did it monitor, sexual identity.

The following data was obtained from an interview with two housing workers with No.5, a voluntary sector agency providing counselling and information services for young people.

These workers considered the main housing issues and problems for local young people to include:

- The view that the Local Reference Rent for Reading was too low and that this severely constrained young people's housing options (enabling them to afford lodgings only rather than individual accommodation).
- The view that the situation above was compounded by the withdrawal of benefit eligibility from 16- and 17-year olds in 1988 and the 1996 Housing Benefit changes which limit benefit entitlement to a single room only rather than a self-contained flat, etc.
- The view that there is insufficient affordable and/or social housing for young people and that the local housing market is a landlords' market.
- The view that housing and homelessness legislation prioritised families and those in Community Care over young people and that in the absence of sufficient housing provision this left single (often young) people with few if any social housing options.
- The view that landlords need to be registered so that there is more *quality* and affordable accommodation.
- The view that none of the 30 accommodation letting agencies in the Reading area are interested in young people because of the housing benefit changes.

- The view that although the Government has recognised the need for more homes, and that although more homes are being built locally, they tend to be luxury rather than social housing.

In an attempt to address some of the problems identified above, No.5 (together with Reading Borough Council) established a Deposit Guarantee Scheme for young people whereby they guaranteed a deposit (bond) up to the value of £250 for a single room for a six month tenancy for those under-25 after receiving references from previous landlords or employers. Reading Borough Council's scheme is constrained by the legislation whereas No.5 could be more flexible: No.5 offered the scheme to those aged 16-18 if they were capable of independent living and to those under-16 if Social Services were involved. Over 300 young people a year joined the scheme.

As a result of its confidentiality code No.5 does not monitor sexual identity. However, young people's sexual identity, if disclosed, would be considered as a factor in their housing need. The housing workers were not aware of any cases over the previous three years.

### **Survey Data**

The following data was obtained from a survey of seven housing associations in the Reading area:

- Only two of these housing associations offer accommodation to couples, the other five only provide for single people. However, the two that do would house same-sex couples.
- Only two operated a right of succession for same-sex couples. The other five offered no rights of succession to anyone.
- Five housing associations allocated provision on a case-by-case need basis whereas two used a points system.
- Four housing associations would consider sexual identity as a factor in evaluating need and priority status (two in the form of 'homophobia harassment') whereas three would not.

## **Discussion**

Data from the interviews and survey clearly reveal a number of important housing issues and problems locally:

- ⇒ The inadequacies and limitations of housing, homelessness and welfare benefit legislation for young people (e.g. criteria and priority need, benefit eligibility and rules, etc.).
- ⇒ The incidence of homophobia within all housing sectors.
- ⇒ The general lack of affordable, quality and/or social housing.
- ⇒ The need for specific training for housing workers around bisexual, gay and lesbian issues.
- ⇒ The discretion involved in the interpretation of legislation and hence housing provision that could be problematic, potentially leaving young bisexuals, gays and lesbian in a vulnerable position: dependent on the commitment and views of housing workers and subject to the vagaries of the local authority. There is a need for clarity in policy, stated policy commitment and guidelines.