

Commonweal & Praxis Community Projects

Interim Evaluation of the NRPF Pilot Project: summative findings

External evaluation team:

Ceri Hutton

Sue Lukes

Heather Petch

1. About the NRPF project and the evaluation

1.a. The NRPF Pilot Project

The NRPF pilot project aims to test whether a financially stable and sustainable service can be delivered to provide a number of units of free housing for migrants with insecure immigration status who are trapped in destitution because they are unable to work or access benefits. Homes are provided in 6 houses purchased as social investment in Redbridge and Croydon, and the project receives further funding from Commonweal. Praxis provide a supported housing service, immigration advice and access to hardship funds and a further house they rent from a private individual.

The key aims of the pilot are to test:

- Whether the provision of S.17 accommodation by specialist and expert asylum and migration support organisations (such as Praxis) and the added value they might bring to the service offers an attractive and replicable model for local authorities to use.
- Whether the empathetic support available to S.17 clients has a positive impact on their well-being, confidence and ability to settle in this country.
- Whether provision of specialist support and advocacy with the S.17 accommodation results in faster / better decisions by the Home Office for these households.
- The costs, management and support structures needed to deliver a successful model and its replicability or transferability to other organisations and/or areas.
- Whether a sustainable business model can be achieved that provides some free accommodation for destitute migrants with no recourse to public funds who cannot access other support.
- Whether the provision of additional support from a secure accommodation base enables those destitute migrants to make successful new applications or appeals whilst building their self-confidence and well-being.

A total of fifteen households have now been housed by the project: 11 referred from local authorities and four from voluntary organisations. Some local authority referrals are families with children with disabilities and high needs, often staying for some time, and even after their initial immigration problems have been resolved. Others may be shorter term placements, often of domestic violence cases or others who have presented quite recently, often as new immigration cases with assessment needs, and may be moved on into asylum support or refuge provision. The four non-local authority residents were all single destitute migrant women. Over this initial period, which has seen many changes of staff, and other challenges, the ways in which this accommodation is provided have changed.

1. b. The evaluation

The evaluation, commissioned in April 2015 from a team with in-depth knowledge of the policy and practice landscape as well as expertise in evaluation methodologies and practice, is both formative and summative, with the team acting as “critical friends” to the project and to Commonweal. After initial scoping, the interim report was written in July 2016, based on interviews with all staff involved, clients and key stakeholders, document and data reviews and various meetings (as participants and as observers). A “sounding board” of key experts and practitioners in this and related fields was convened to reflect on current and future relevant trends, supported by

documents produced by the evaluation team and their conclusions fed into the interim report as well. The interim report focused significantly on the formative elements, and recommendations for next steps by Praxis, Commonweal and the investors. This summary report, which is written largely for external consumption, covers only the summative results, i.e. how the project is doing so far.

1.c. Context for the project

The year since the project started has been tumultuous, seeing a general election followed by the EU referendum and a subsequent change of government. No one knows how these changes will pan out, but it is reasonable to surmise that many of the changes and the ripples out from them will affect the project.

House prices

- i. Most commentators say that there is likely to be an effect on house prices, particularly in London and at the higher end. The difficulties of property companies post Brexit (seven of the largest commercial property funds halted trading in the first week of July according to the FT) may indicate that the rising market on which the project's investment base is predicated will slow or end.

Migrants in the UK

- ii. The situation for all migrants (and people perceived as migrants) has undeniably got worse during and after the referendum campaign which was infested with racist discourse. There has been a recorded increase in racist attacks and incidents and a lot of anecdotal evidence of migrants considering return
- iii. The negotiations prior to the referendum and the general climate of opinion during and after it have affected many organisations' willingness to provide services to migrants, to such an extent that illegal refusals of, for example, benefits and housing services had been reported anecdotally. This is likely to affect both migrants needing accommodation and section 17 families needing to move on into mainstream support and housing.
- iv. A substantial body of research in the UK and elsewhere shows that "crackdowns" on immigration generally lead to more undocumented migrants and also usually to more presentations to local authorities as people lose accommodation, employment or other support

Local authorities

- v. As a generalisation, inner London authorities had lots of cases when the project was first designed and were assumed to be likely enthusiastic users. They are now seeing fewer presentations (the effect of the housing market on driving poorer people out of inner London) and have also developed their own responses which include "toughening up" and buying in their own immigration advice.
- vi. Outer London authorities have seen presentations rise, but some have worked to reduce spend in similar ways to inner boroughs (in particular a group of 6 mainly outer London boroughs working with Lewisham and the Home Office). While this is unlikely to affect the project directly (there will always be enough new cases to fill places) it may affect the options for rolling out or replicating. The project, however, is likely to find itself working more with authorities with less experience of providing S17 accommodation, and potentially less political sophistication. Such

authorities are less likely to sympathise with the wider aims of the project, and may even find it difficult to contract with an NGO that finds itself in oppositional roles at times.

Immigration Act 2016

- vii. The Immigration Act 2016 provisions on what is currently S17 are due to come into effect in April 2017. Regulations (which will contain much important detail) are yet to be laid. Alongside the Act is the further restriction on most appeals, which means that fewer families will be able to appeal a negative decision from within the UK. What is clear now is that after April 2017:
- there will be much closer working between the Home Office and local authorities
 - some cases currently getting support might not under the new regime
 - the Home Office will expect local authorities to refuse support to cases where the application has come to an end, although it is likely that some local authorities (maybe encouraged by legal action) will continue to do so while any challenge to the Home Office decision is pending
 - levels of support and decisions about them may become more uniform
 - most importantly: local authorities will have no statutory responsibility to support families where no application is pending

2. Achievements and outcomes to date

2.a. Outcomes for clients

Not all clients were interviewed for the evaluation for various reasons, but the team also used material from staff, referring agencies and monitoring data to review outcomes so far. Key points include

- Praxis brings significant added value to this project because it is one of the few organisations that can deal with the complexity and range of **legal issues** likely to present. These include cases based on long residence which may need extensive evidence gathering, people who have been very poorly represented in the past (but still may be reluctant to change advocates), families with additional needs related to disability, and those trapped by the failure of housing law to keep pace with immigration law changes. One man had particularly poor representation from his solicitor

Praxis requested sight of the file and rationale for the refusal. It was a very poor application ...Praxis staff identified that the solicitor was being exploitative, and was known for this. This was shared with social services who insisted that he agree to work with someone from Praxis to oversee and check the application and that he should get the pro bono commitment made by the solicitor in writing. This resulted in him agreeing to be supported by Praxis and social services agreeing to provide extra resource to secure an expert witness sourced by Praxis. Praxis also advised that the application go in his wife's name which would have more chance of success (she is also a more cooperative client). The application is now almost ready to go and it is a much better one now as there is the expert evidence plus reports from professionals working with the disabled son plus other elements explained by Praxis (project support worker)

- The holistic support offered includes ensuring that users are **connected to appropriate services** which will also assist them once they move on. While social services often refer to specialist support, Praxis has ensured that all users access both primary services such as health and schooling and others that may provide vital support like libraries and leisure centres.

I took her to the library and all these years she said she thought you needed papers and residency to use a library. The first book she got out was about Bruce Forsyth - she really loves Bruce Forsyth. It made me think how many free spaces there are in London that are warm, have activities etc but people don't know about. (Interview with project support worker]

Faith communities have been of particular importance to some, and food vouchers and financial support have been vital particularly for those referred by the voluntary sector. Praxis has organised three events to bring users together and plans more once the project is running at capacity. Residents have been positive about these.

- The difference in **the health and well-being** of families between when they moved in and after several months was marked - both for parents, and especially children. This was largely due to the additional space and sense of greater control over it than in their previous housing situations. The single women also described feelings of being overjoyed, released or experiencing a different and more positive perspective on life after achieving the stability and sense of agency that being housed by Praxis provided, especially when compared with the worry, stress and in one case exploitation they had experienced prior to being housed.

"This will sound a bit strange ... do I feel more of a connection more than when I was not in this situation? Yes. Before I was trying to sort things out with the Home Office myself. I was in survival mode. I had friends but the experience I've had since, meeting new people and their compassion for other people. It's really opened my eyes. I find myself looking more at the positive than the negative. Before I was so independent. It was very difficult for me to receive. It's not bad to accept; receiving is a blessing, also to the person giving to you. This experience has been eye opening. It's changed me a lot. You can have nothing and still allow yourself to be happy." [MF]

- Residents had some **negative experiences** related to the location of the properties, and to sharing accommodation. A couple of residents reported that over time they had become lower in mood and more dispirited because their immigration cases were dragging on

"The powerlessness they feel whilst waiting for out of their control processes to happen overshadows the home." (Project support worker)

Project workers managed these tensions well according to interviews with residents.

2.b. Outcomes for referral agencies

Referrals to the project come from local authorities paying for places for their S17 clients and from a range of agencies looking for accommodation for destitute migrants, including Praxis internal referrals.

- Three **local authorities** currently refer and one other user was funded by their local authority. One was enthusiastic about the project as a policy initiative and have used it as

an example of good practice in an intercity collaboration. All three reported positive experiences of using the service, appreciating particularly

- Care about risk management
- Access to holistic advice
- Access to immigration advice
- Good quality accommodation
- Flexibility and willingness to negotiate and accommodate
- Presence in the borough (although the other side of that is exemplified by one worker who said: *“We want to fill the rooms because we don’t want other authorities in there”*)

“My perspective was they help with housing and were given advice to move them on to become independent.”

“It was straightforward”

“Very good with immigration, got one client leave and we were very pleased, they are very good with services especially GPs.... Overall, they have delivered all they said they would.”

“Praxis was very, very helpful and went above the remit”

Boroughs, however, tended to prioritise referrals of more vulnerable clients because other providers offered no support, and there were issues about clients need for or willingness to use the immigration advice that was part of the package.

- **NGOs** also refer to the service, although in practice they viewed it as a referral to Praxis generally and so were often unaware of the specific project or how it worked. Given the small number of places available, most referrals did not get housed, but once clients were in the accommodation communication was good and referrers seemed happy with the service.

2.c. Learning about the model and key achievements to date

The evaluation reviewed how far the assumptions underpinning the model were proving to be valid and what lessons are being learned. We also identified key risks, how they were being mitigated and what else needed to be done. Apart from the lessons for use by the project, Commonwealth and the investors, which have been fed back into the project and will be reviewed and developed in the final evaluation report, the main achievements identified to date are that:

- i. **It has got ‘up and running’**, and established as a working model. There is a general view that the first rocky stages have been successfully navigated, lessons learnt, and the model is now available to be genuinely tested.
- ii. **Good local authority relationships** have been established and progress in this area has been better than hoped for at one point
- iii. **A suite of policies and procedures** have been drafted which are in line with good practice: these had to be developed in full as Praxis is new to housing provision, but are now nearly all drafted, and will enable a more efficient functioning which is better able to manage risk.

- iv. **Accommodation and support have been provided** to destitute and vulnerable people who would not otherwise have accessed this.
- v. The project has proved itself **highly responsive to client needs**
- vi. The model being trialled feels **genuinely innovative** as well as in line with Praxis' values and core priorities of homelessness and destitution. *"We are doing something nobody else is doing, thinking outside the box and taking action. That's commendable"*
- vii. The **evidence and learning** emerging from the project is of use to **Praxis**. *"It is giving us evidence of what is happening on the ground. We have been able to gather stories and evidence about what is happening to people and how you can resolve their situations. That is enabling us to have some influence. And I would hope, as we have appointed a communications manager, we will be able to increasingly use some of that information and knowledge."*
- viii. The project is also **enabling learning for Commonwealth and investors**, ranging from the discussions happening through the formal evaluation, to the insights which a Praxis service user was able to provide to Commonwealth trustees.