

Justlife

Case study: Small charities and social change
Field: Homelessness

At a glance

Justlife works mainly in Manchester and Brighton, and uses targeted, assertive activities to focus on people in unsupported temporary accommodation, particularly those hidden from the public eye. They have 24 staff, with seven regular volunteers alongside others who donate time or experience. They have an annual income of £757,000 and funding is a mix of grants, donations, legacies and a small amount from trading activities.

Focus of the case study

The focus of this case study is influencing the policy and practice of the local council and health service in relation to people in unsupported temporary accommodation.



What does advocacy mean for them?

Justlife was formed in 2011 in response to the death of Jason, a homeless person in Manchester who had fallen through all the services that might have prevented this tragedy. Its origins present a powerful founding story that remains relevant today for those living in unsupported temporary accommodation, and its mission is to prevent other vulnerable adults falling through the net. Starting with the person, 'Influencing and change' is one of their five strategic priorities. Their aims are to *'improve our service'* and *'affect the wider society'* using *'frontline research – taken from the work we do'*.

They have set up local homelessness groups to look at how emergency and temporary accommodation is dealt with and to make suggestions for improvement. They have also tackled issues such as substance abuse, aggressive behaviour and frightening or dangerous situations, particularly in properties where those with addictions were co-housed with families with young children.

Staff are skilled at day-to-day engagement and support services and gain expertise about the key issues. This can be fed into wider discussion inside and outside the organisation about how to change systems, and ultimately to change policy.

'The majority we work with are single adults with multiple and complex needs'. Rehousing brings with it high start-up costs which can be overwhelming at first, particularly for disadvantaged people, so support can be vital at this crossover stage. The practice developed on these issues involves working with the person *'and with what is out there'*, helping them to build networks and get involved in things that they find fulfilling.

Justlife draws on the experience and knowledge of their frontline workers to improve the policy and practice of the local council and the health service, and to join up services between public and voluntary agencies. They work to *'build bridges'* with private sector providers of housing where there might be poor accommodation for the renter but, on the other side, rent arrears for the landlord.

What's worked?

Justlife sees their main contribution as having a solid practice base, being close to those who are in temporary accommodation, and working with other agencies to gain a more responsive service for those in this category.

Justlife's work on health engagement is funded by the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG). So, Justlife may help arrange transport for clients' appointments, or assist in getting them registered with a specialist GP service. This presents a win-win as it can reduce unplanned access to accident and emergency services at hospital and support those with addictions or mental health problems in other ways.

Getting all sides involved in finding solutions has reaped rewards: *'we are NOT here to point fingers, our approach is to get people in a room talking and see ... can we all be part of the solution'*. For example, with accommodation providers, they sought to avoid evictions by letting landlords know of tenants whom Justlife was supporting: *'Eviction rates went down from temporary accommodation as a result of this work'*. On

health and safety in short-stay housing, *'the reason we have traction is that – it is a genuine collaboration and there is trust to make a difference'*.

Justlife seeks to join up services and aid communication and coordination by working with others wherever possible. The Temporary Accommodation Action Group (TAAG) is facilitated by Justlife – so that other frontline services (welfare officers, commissioners, workers in adult social care, landlords, etc.) can jointly identify problems and solutions for those in temporary accommodation. The 'Fulfilling Lives' network is specifically concerned with systems change at a local level. They do not say, *'we can't do it'*, but, *'we will talk to influencers'*. They do not see a threat to their advocacy: *'we keep ourselves grounded ... our suggestions are about what we do with people we work with – so they are practical'*.

Justlife has worked with other partners, including Lankelly Chase, and published a report, 'Are Temporary Accommodation Boards Feasible?', using research from their funders. They seek out policy influencers where they can – for example in the northern tank tank, the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), or organising a Parliamentary lobby with MPs through local connections.

Justlife also tries to link in with bigger charities (such as Crisis and Shelter) on wider issues and on training and engagement. Opportunities are opening at present because *'the issue is becoming so big'*, and this has led to positive relations.

Challenges/what we've learnt?

The complex set of disadvantages faced by homeless people in temporary accommodation is, unfortunately, still prevalent. *'It is about getting needs met ... so people who can't get upstairs need ground floor accommodation – but there is a lack of supply'*. Progress can be *'painfully slow'* and *'systems are going round in circles – when a hostel closes it is a disaster – and it keeps happening'*. However, the problem of temporary homelessness appears to be more in the public eye and there seems to be some appetite to address it. In the short term, this may be about joining up the support systems more effectively – the cost-benefit issues of this are clear in relation to the knock-on effects for emergency support services.

In temporary accommodation, clients can feel *'they have no control over their lives'*, so Justlife works on ways to ease that pressure (by, for example, sitting with them when they phone the DWP about benefits), but they are also conscious of trying to avoid over-dependency on them. Their service is not funded to operate at the weekend or in the evenings.



So far, funds for this work have not come from the local authority. This gives Justlife more flexibility and independence, as clients may tell their staff details that they would not necessarily tell the council. As a result of Justlife's work with landlords, however, the local authority is considering commissioning them to undertake a one-year

project to develop this work further. This is welcome but also presents a conflict, as Justlife's position of trust with clients could be weakened. *'What will it mean for representing the client in these situations ... will it compromise us if we get money direct from the local authority?'* On the other hand, it would provide Justlife with greater access and an 'in' for influencing. The dilemma is: *'how do we get across campaigning issues while keeping in touch with workers and people who are homeless?'* Undertaking research is a possible way to resolve this dilemma.

Justlife also has an appetite for discussing the possibilities of 'skeleton' networks of like-minded organisations that might organise temporary joint actions such as research, collation of practice experience, or policy influence on shared issues in the field. These groups might have a pot of trust money that could be drawn down to do ad hoc collaboration on an emergent issue – that might be more useful than a permanent national network.

This is the case study of one of 11 organisations we spoke to from four fields: criminal justice; homelessness; migration; and violence against women and girls. These case study organisations had annual incomes between £50k and just over £1m. We are incredibly grateful for the rich and open insights that were shared with us.

The case studies are part of IVAR's study *Small Charities and Social Change*, which builds on existing research, drawing on the experience of 11 organisations, to explore the role and contribution of small charities in more depth. It asks how and why small charities are challenging, shaping and changing policy, practice and attitudes. It discusses the challenges and opportunities that they face in doing so.

The report and case studies can be found here www.ivar.org.uk/social-change.