

There's no place like a council home to damage your health



It's my life
Clare Allan

By comparison with the population at large, a disproportionate number of people living in social housing suffer from long-term mental health problems. On the face of it, the reason for this is obvious: a diagnosis of serious mental illness gives people priority in accessing social housing, and in many ways this is an excellent thing.

The security of a permanent home is not an option in the private rented sector (it may cease to be one in any rented sector if the Conservatives get elected), and such stability is of particular importance for those whose very existence may feel precarious at best. Moreover, trying to claim benefits in a private flat can be particularly stressful. For a start, many landlords will not accept tenants on housing benefit (a practice that should be made illegal). Second, you need a deposit of at least a full month's rent in advance, which is hard enough to achieve if you're working, let alone if you're unemployed. And, third, claims often take so long to process that rent arrears build up, causing problems with landlords and untold amounts of stress and aggravation.

But there's another reason why social tenants are so over-represented on the wards. A quick poll of any group of patients is likely to leave you wondering if living in social housing causes almost as many problems as it solves.

The construction is often of poor quality, with little or no sound insulation. In my last flat, I could hear my neighbour using his bathroom. I could hear his answerphone messages and knew the names of all his acquaintances. At night, I could hear him snoring so clearly that we might have been sharing a bed. Such lack of basic privacy is difficult for anyone to live with. But if someone is manic, unable to sleep, pacing the flat all night, if they're blasting their

music, or shouting at voices, it's easy to see how tensions between neighbours can rapidly escalate.

Then there is the issue of repairs - a topic guaranteed to send blood pressure soaring in many a social tenant. The story of my toilet flush offers a salient example. It has broken five times in five months, and three times in the last three weeks. Five plumbers have come and gone, each confident he had fixed the problem. As I write, it has broken again.

So far, so aggravating. But the part that had me literally crying with frustration was dealing with the council repairs team. The basic scenario is this: you call, you hold, you get through to the switchboard, and your call is transferred to a queue. You hold again. You get put through and then immediately cut off, so you have to call again. When at last you reach the repairs team, they seem friendly and helpful. They book you an appointment. You wait in half a day, but nobody shows up. You call them again, get cut off again, call again, get through and are told the reason no one came is that the appointment was never booked. The friendly, helpful voice on the phone promises to remedy this now and books you another appointment. You wait in, nobody comes, you call and are told the reason no one came is that the appointment was never booked. This is not an exaggeration. This is what happened.

Try dealing with this when you're depressed already. It is just not possible. In the days when I had a social worker, I would, by now, have asked for her help, and I'm sure she would have helped, too. But the only way she could have done so was by calling repairs just as I did. And queuing and waiting and being cut off, and being promised that someone would call her back, and nobody doing so, and so on. I wonder how many social work hours the council might free up by sorting out its repairs.

I was pondering this recently during the hour-and-a-half I spent queuing in my local housing office simply to hand in a form. Despite the Charter Mark, Housing Excellence Award and Investor in People logo displayed, it did seem to me there was room for improvement. It would cost, of course. But mental health problems cost, too.

Clare Allan is an author and writes on mental health issues.

Off Diary



Unicef is helping youngsters to campaign for their rights to be recognised in local communities in the UK Photograph: Martin Godwin

Children champion their rights

The luxury waterside shopping and leisure development in Portsmouth is on the doorstep of teenagers' homes, yet they felt excluded. Security guards often asked hoodies to leave and a lack of bike parks made the marina area even less child-friendly.

Six months ago, youngsters from Portchester community school, whose catchment area includes some of the neighbourhood's most deprived estates, met the Port Solent managers. Now, plans are afoot for juggling workshops and noticeboards to advertise community events, so young people are starting to feel more welcome in the area.

It was a 20-strong group of schoolchildren, the Rights, Respect and Responsibility Group, that broke down the barrier between local businesses and young people. The group was launched three years ago as part of a Unicef drive to champion children's rights in 1,000 schools and nurseries in the UK.

On Monday, Unicef UK will launch

Put it Right, an ambitious five-year £55m fundraising campaign that includes an expansion of such advocacy work through a neighbourhood-based children's rights scheme.

Child Friendly Communities, to be launched early next year as part of the campaign, will raise awareness about the rights of young people, promote their participation locally and challenge negative attitudes to children and young people.

The Unicef UK executive director, David Bull, says: "We want local authorities to try to embed children's rights approaches into their policy and practice. I hope the

campaign will be transformative in changing public attitudes to children."

Unicef is developing guidance for councils on how to implement a rights-based community approach. The scheme is not intended to cost councils money as its focus is cultural change.

A local authority winning child friendly status would ensure, for example, that high street cafes welcomed breastfeeding mothers or discouraged shops from banning groups of children. It would properly consider children's views, rather than rely on tokenistic consultation. If a child is to be taken into care, it would ask whether the wishes of the youngster have really been taken into account.

A child-friendly community would challenge public perceptions by, for example, highlighting a successful young offender rehabilitation scheme in its newsletter instead of simply stressing penalties for troublesome teenagers.

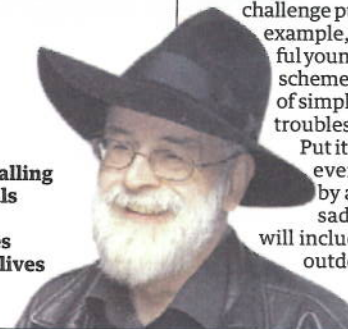
Put it Right is Unicef's biggest ever UK campaign. Voiced by actor and Unicef ambassador Ewan McGregor, it will include print, television and outdoor poster adverts.

Saba Salman

Quote of the week

"My life, my death, my choice"

The author Terry Pratchett, who has Alzheimer's disease, calling for euthanasia tribunals to help people with incurable diseases who want to end their lives



Affairs of state

about the same number of new arrivals, including a Vietnamese waiter and a Spanish student. "It's more or less those numbers every week," says Louisa Torstenson, 28, a production planner for a telecom company who has been volunteering at the cafe for two-and-a-half years. "I work

regular hours so it's no big deal to be here every week," she says.

"It is such an easy way to help someone," says Eva Malmros, 28, after chatting with a 13-year-old Iraqi girl about her school lessons. "You see how happy people are afterwards."



Working together

How extended services benefit all

It's five years since the introduction of extended services and now 94% of schools and their partners are signed up. In a special supplement in Education Guardian on 9 February, we look at the impact services are having, the lessons that have been learned and the challenges ahead.

the guardian



For Marktröm, the work that IM does in Malmö cannot take the place of that done by the public sector. "We are a complement to what it does," she says. "It is important to be involved in your society and show that people care. If you are involved, you understand that you can influence society."

Homework help

For this reason Marktröm disagrees with the state contracting out services to charities and has refused a recent request from Malmö city authorities for IM to run all the homework help provided to pupils in Rosengård - the city currently does some projects, while IM does others.

"We said no," says Marktröm. "We don't want unpaid people to do something that the state should provide. It is the city's responsibility, and it's important that they are present. Our role is to be here as a complement."

According to Ludvig Sandberg, a political adviser at the Forum for Voluntary Social Work, an umbrella organisation representing Swedish charities, most Swedes think that an active public sector is good for civil society. "If there is less government, the risks of inequality and poverty are much larger and the risks of clashes on ethnic or cultural grounds would grow a lot," he points out. "This would be a quite different environment for civil society to operate in."

Yet the debate in Sweden on this question is far from static. Fredrik Reinfeldt, the country's centre-right prime minister - often labelled the Swedish David Cameron - has been describing the idea that civil society, not the welfare state, is the basis of society and that the public sector is there to assist. This runs contrary to the classic Swedish social-democratic concept of the "strong society", where the



The Spiritus Mundi orchestra takes to the streets of Malmö

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public sector provides the welfare that the citizens need and is the basis for society as a whole.

But what comes back again and again from Sweden's experience is that collaboration between the voluntary and public sectors is what matters. "We are not afraid of government," says Melius. "We are able to survive and grow by, for instance, getting commissions from the city of Malmö, or when they help us with our application for EU funding... Government should not get out of the way."

Brannebo adds: "The public sector can learn from our experience and we can learn from theirs. There is room for both."