



How homelessness charity services changed throughout COVID-19 and recommendations for future working

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LSE Housing and Communities

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Introduction

Homelessness charity Oasis Community Housing commissioned the London School of Economics (LSE) Housing and Communities to:

- Review the homelessness charity's response to the COVID-19 pandemic since the beginning of 2020 to mid-2021, and find out how their response compares with other comparable organisations.
- Identify key options Oasis Community Housing needs to consider in order to optimise service delivery in the future i.e. post COVID-19, and in the likelihood of further pandemic risks.

The research was conducted during the first half of 2021 and focuses on the charity's services in the North East (Gateshead, Sunderland and South Tyneside). The assessment is based on interviews with Oasis Community Housing staff and external stakeholders or commissioners; charity records and documents; and a range of external independent evaluation reports. While interviews with Oasis Community Housing clients were originally planned, in the end this was not possible to arrange due to COVID-19 pressures.

This document provides a summary of those findings. The full report is available at <https://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/case/cr/casereport138.pdf>

Oasis Community Housing is an organisation providing services for vulnerable people and families who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. The approach taken is to provide person-centred support, including addressing the drivers of homelessness – hence its additional services of domestic abuse and employment support.

The origins of the charity lie in initial homelessness projects started in Gateshead and London over 30 years ago, some of which are still operating. Today, the charity uses 85 properties to house 158 residents - plus a small number of babies and children with their mothers in specialist units. Overall, the charity works with around 2,000 people each year in order to prevent or support their path out of homelessness.

Executive summary

The LSE CASE evaluation report first looked in detail at Oasis Community Housing's Crisis services, and identified areas where Oasis Community Housing has options for optimising service delivery arising from current services and in light of the proposed growth of the work into new geographies across the UK.¹ The report then does a similar exercise for the Supported Housing, Aspire employment support and Empower domestic abuse services, followed by analysis and suggested options to explore for the future.

The next section considers the impact of COVID-19 on each of the services, and the actions taken by Oasis Community Housing to mitigate the impacts on their clients. This is followed by a wide ranging look at the actions which the charity has taken in comparison to other agencies across England, drawing on a range of comprehensive and authoritative reviews. Options for consideration to consolidate or change Oasis Community Housing's approaches are then explored.

The analysis of the evidence offers a number of key findings, highlighted in more detail on the following pages.

¹ Please refer to Oasis Community Housing's Strategy for 2021 - 2024



Main findings

Crisis services

Crisis support and accommodation, which includes 'Basis' day centres and access to 'Basis Beds', which include some accommodation funded under the Government's Rough Sleepers Initiative (RSI) and some offering a form of Housing First provision.

- Oasis Community Housing has, over the last 7 years, and particularly in the context of COVID-19, been responsive to the needs of local people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness
- The person-centred approach, which is a stated organisational priority, has been developed by active participation in a range of prototypes, and programmes which have tested out how to deliver person-centred services
- These have also been developed through building or supporting local partnerships with complementary service providers, and in conjunction with the relevant local authorities
- In response to COVID-19, rapid and effective changes were made to services to address the special needs of the charity and partner clients, and significant staff and management effort went into ensuring this work was effective
- Many of these initiatives have been subject to external evaluation which has been positive about the charity's contribution and performance

In considering the Crisis services, amongst the main issues arising for Oasis Community Housing to consider moving forwards are:

- Better pre-planning of new initiatives, including more input from frontline staff
- More structured collection of data on outputs, progress in the client journey, and outcomes. This includes the development of the data management systems to enable continuous monitoring and reporting on cases, key indicators, and patterns of information to understand "what works for whom"
- Structured and adequate procedural guidance to define and embed the Oasis ethos and good practice
- Clearer explanation and operationalisation of core but complex objectives, goals, and values including "always another chance"
- Applying most of the above points to the scoping and implementation planning of the proposed expansion into two new cities alongside Oasis Charitable Trust community hubs
- Ensuring that existing staff are valued and given the opportunity to have career development through this expansion
- Seeking ways to add more financial stability in the course of this growth

"Basis is an excellent resource and patients can be signposted from there for support with applications for housing and benefits." **Local Authority interview**



Supported services

Supported accommodation, which is specialist accommodation for vulnerable young women, including care leavers, and mothers and infants who are mainly subject to Child Protection plans; Support for women in Gateshead experiencing domestic abuse (non-residential); and Non-residential support for vulnerable people in parts of the North East who are eligible for assistance with preparing to enter the job market.

- Some of the support services for young women have been in place for over 20 years, and have a good local reputation for meeting local needs effectively
- These services have been expanded progressively, in partnership with Gateshead Council, and also in the London Borough of Southwark where Oasis Community Housing won a local competitive tender bid
- The overall Aspire programme was making progress despite the challenges of COVID-19
- The development and delivery of the Aspire employment services takes place as part of a wider consortium of providers, under contract. The independent evaluation reports of the consortium delivering the services show positive results, although it is difficult to identify the specific contribution of Oasis Community Housing
- Wellbeing support is a vital element of the Aspire / Wise Steps programme supporting participants' journeys towards work. This type of support has increased due to the impact of COVID-19 on participants' lives
- The Empower domestic abuse services are available to any clients in the Gateshead area, and are contracted by the Northumbria Police Commissioner
- Oasis Community Housing quickly adapted their Empower education work to be delivered digitally or over the phone for women who lacked access or confidence to use Zoom. The teams maintained some level of direct face to face support where necessary in line with COVID-safety guidance throughout the lockdown
- The evaluation of the domestic abuse services shows positive outcomes in relation to the indicators mandated under the contract, and the service is now under pressure from the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns

- Aspire and Empower are actively made available to Oasis Community Housing clients in all parts of the organisation, in addition to the wider client groups targeted. This is in line with the original intention in developing the services
- One of the main issues arising for Oasis Community Housing to consider moving forwards is how Empower and Aspire fit into the business, in order to maximise their ability to assist homeless and vulnerable clients already being assisted by the charity. This can be done in the light of new and detailed sector work on how best to address domestic abuse, developed during the pandemic

“Oasis regularly attend meetings and play an active part in coordinating partnerships locally.”

“Oasis is always open to conversations. Domestic abuse work is very good and make positive referrals to other agencies. We would like to be part of the new model [post COVID-19] of Basis hub.”

“Oasis helps clients re-engage with services as they often have known them for a long time.” **Stakeholder/partner interviews**



Response to the pandemic

'Everyone In' was very successful throughout England in shielding rough sleepers and other homeless people during COVID-19. Medical and other evidence shows that this resulted in hundreds of lives being saved because housing and support staff "went the extra mile" across the country. These were highlighted in a range of comprehensive reports we reviewed. Comparing Oasis Community Housing to the England-wide assessment of outcomes, including Lord Kerlake's comprehensive overview of outcomes, many of the successful steps taken by other similar agencies were also taken by Oasis Community Housing. These included:

- Effective partnership working with the local authority
- Giving autonomy to local staff
- Providing food and good quality self-contained housing, which was essential to encourage people in, and subsequently engage with services

Successful mobilisation was usually related to the quality of pre-existing services. It was also the case that many staff were faced with fatigue and stress, so action taken to address this was essential. Programmes and approaches which develop models of person-centred work across partnerships should be developed for roll out more widely.

Other issues raised in the reports and elsewhere which we suggest the charity focus on for the future are:

- Celebrating, reflecting on, and documenting the very effective actions taken in response to COVID-19, to create a bank of good practice in rapid reaction to pandemic type events, showing how things were done
- Exploring some of the health-related good practice which emerged during COVID, which could provide an additional dimension to these critical problems which clients face
- Refining the current Oasis Community Housing model of Housing First, particularly in relation to whether it specifically targets entrenched rough sleepers with high needs where previous interventions have failed
- Initiating discussion with Bristol and Birmingham on how they managed COVID-19 in the light of the landscape of their housing need and local partners. Examples of good practices in these cities figured in the various reports
- In both the COVID-19 context and the growth context, making better use of existing guidance checklists and examples when preparing new procedures and contingency plans for possible further pandemics

Additional post-pandemic measures include: a wider process of horizon scanning and risk management of pandemic type of risks; and specific options around monitoring protected characteristics such as ethnicity and religion to demonstrate that Oasis Community Housing is delivering on its clearly stated commitments to equal treatment.

"Oasis were straight away in the hotels. They had practical ideas about what was needed, and continue to be responsive, for example in helping with returns on COVID-19 vaccinations."

Local Authority partner



Conclusion

Oasis Community Housing is doing excellent work with a wide range of clients who are vulnerable, difficult to help and who require the type of patient and focused work which Oasis Community Housing has made a central element of its services. They have the opportunity to bring these services to other local communities alongside the existing network of Oasis UK partner organisations, as part of their three-year Strategy (2021-24). In planning this, there are a range of ways in which they could strengthen and better structure existing data-gathering systems, reduce risk, and simplify structures to facilitate spreading their approach and services to other cities.

Overall, the report shows that Oasis Community Housing is delivering some excellent and person-centred work in the North East, including a fast and effective response to COVID-19.



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Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion

A full copy of the report can be accessed on the LSE website at <https://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/case/cr/casereport138.pdf>

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