

Localism and homelessness: a decade of disaster in England



Suzanne Fitzpatrick, Hal Pawson, and Beth Watts use the example of rising homelessness in England to illustrate the argument that localist policymaking has an intrinsic tendency to disadvantage socially marginalised groups.

COVID-19 has prompted a radical and rapid nation-wide shift in responses to some of the most acute forms of homelessness. With government financial support and guidance, local authorities have sought to get 'Everyone In' as street homelessness has been reframed as an urgent public health issue, as well as an acute socio-economic and housing problem.

The necessary scale of action reflects a decade in which homelessness in England has climbed far above the levels seen in 2010. Before the pandemic, the most extreme form of homelessness – rough sleeping – was running at a level [140% higher than nine years earlier](#). Temporary accommodation placements of homeless households awaiting rehousing were [65% above their 2010 position](#), while local authority use of B&B hotels for such 'statutorily' homeless families had risen [well over threefold](#). Local authorities and homelessness services now face a huge challenge in resettling temporarily accommodated street sleepers.

Drawing on [recently published research](#), we argue that now is the time to reflect on the longer-term lessons of the past decade: how did the problem get this big, and how – when the current crisis abates – are we going to stop it from ballooning still further?

It is well understood that the combined impacts of social security cuts, housing market pressures and local government funding reductions [shoulder much of the blame](#) for the homelessness 'decade of disaster' just witnessed in England. But our research argues that the damaging effect of these measures has been magnified by the ideology and practice of localism, rampant under the 2010-15 Coalition Government, and remaining influential today.

Localism has been described as a ['positive disposition to the decentralisation of political power'](#). More specifically, as seen in England over the past decade or so, Westminster governments' localist measures involved delegating to local authorities 'financial flexibilities' and other policy autonomies. Important examples include expenditure decisions for social programmes like Supporting People and Local Welfare Assistance schemes, and Council Tax Benefit structures, as well as increased reliance on locally-determined Discretionary Housing Payments to compensate for widening gaps in the national Housing Benefit scheme. In parallel, the Localism Act 2011 radically increased local authority discretion over social housing eligibility and tenure security rules.

The rhetoric and practice of such moves has proved alluring to many on both the political Left and Right. For local authorities themselves, moves badged as the awarding of financial freedoms have a natural appeal, although this has sometimes faded with the growing realisation that the underlying motivation has been to absolve government responsibility for reduced provision. Thus, as seen in austerity-era England, the ['cutting and devolving'](#) of former central government budgets has sometimes been a prelude to eliminating them altogether – a long recognized political tactic to mute opposition and/or deflect blame.

However, as demonstrated by our [research](#), there are effects *intrinsic* to the logic of localism that will tend to have damaging impacts on homeless people and other marginalised groups, even outside a period of austerity, albeit that these effects will be amplified by spending cuts.

First, localisation of the homelessness policymaking function, by definition, diffuses responsibility across a multitude of, often very small, local authorities who may lack any specialist capacity in this field. Major steps forward on homelessness have usually depended on the legal, financial and regulatory levers that central government uniquely has at its disposal. Examples include the [two-thirds reduction in rough sleeping](#) between 1999-2002, and the [50% reduction](#) in temporary accommodation placements between 2003-2010.

Second, the more localized the welfare and housing safety net, the more likely it is that vulnerable people mobile between local authority areas will be excluded from assistance, as local authorities face both fiscal and political incentives to restrict local services to 'local people'.

Third, 'unpopular' groups, especially those with complex support needs, are vulnerable to marginalisation in decentralised systems that can leave politically invisible or geographically dispersed groups '[at the mercy of the vagaries of local politics and funding choices made under the pressure of cuts](#)'. Other academics have [adroitly noted](#) that 'in such circumstances (high potential savings, low political costs), localization is highly likely to lead to reductions in the entitlements of small and relatively vulnerable groups within local populations'.

Fourth, and most fundamentally, the weakening of the national floor of entitlement-based protection in favour of locally-determined, variable levels of assistance, introduces a morally unsupportable level of horizontal inequity: it treats people in the same circumstances differently. The indignity and disempowerment intrinsic to reliance on (local) discretionary rather than (national) entitlement-based assistance must also be recognised. [Research on destitution](#) has highlighted the humiliation experienced by people forced to go 'cap in hand' to local charitable outlets like foodbanks to meet their most fundamental needs.

It is an easy and crowd-pleasing claim to assert that [local 'folk know what's best'](#) as advanced by the then Secretary of State under the 2010-15 Coalition Government. But, when it comes to the population group we are discussing, this is often a fallacy, including with respect to well-intentioned local community organisations. In fact, some 'path-dependent' voluntary sector actors, many of them faith-based and [providing rudimentary types of support](#), can be significant *barriers* to progress in the homelessness field, whose opposition to radical reform has to be overcome with national, evidence-based initiatives.

Our message is that strong central government leadership and accountability are needed to drive positive change on homelessness – or even just to stabilise a deteriorating situation. Criticism is not aimed at local authorities, many of whom [have risen to an impossible challenge](#) in an almost heroic fashion. Rather it is to argue that central government must never again be allowed to abdicate its responsibility in this area.

It should not have taken a global pandemic to expose the lunacy of 'localist' approaches to meeting the fundamental material needs of vulnerable people, nor to have rough sleeping [recognised as the national public health emergency that it has always been](#). 'Building back better' post-COVID-19 is a massive challenge for all involved in tackling homelessness in England, and central government must play its full role alongside the local authority and third sector partners who have been left to pick up the pieces far too often over the last ten years.

Note: the above draws on the authors' published work in [Politics & Policy](#).

About the Authors



Suzanne Fitzpatrick is Professor of Housing and Social Policy and Director of the [Institute for Social Policy, Housing and Equalities Research \(I-SPHERE\)](#), Heriot-Watt University.



Hal Pawson is Professor Housing Research and Policy and Associate Director at the City Futures Research Centre, University of New South Wales.

Beth Watts is a Senior Research Fellow at I-SPHERE, Heriot-Watt University.



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