

Homelessness count – Investigating a regular count of the population who are without shelter in New Zealand

Notes from the working group session, 23 August 2018

Attendees

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Andy Mannering, Hamilton City Council
Ioana Manu, Hamilton City Council
Olivia Miller, Hutt City Council
Samuel Cooper, Hutt City Council
Steve Stiles, Nelson City Council
Julie McDonald, Palmerston North City Council
Paul Mason, Tauranga City Council
Veronica King, Taupo District Council
Tara Ruff, Wellington City Council
Geoff Lawson, Wellington City Council

Lauren Tamehana, Whanganui District Council
Alex Staric, Whanganui District Council
Mike Reid, LGNZ (part of meeting)
Megan Beecroft, MSD Housing Policy (part of meeting)
Alice Golding, MSD Housing Policy
Tania McHugo, MSD Strategic Purchasing
Laura Lumley, MSD Strategic Purchasing
Guy Chisholm, MSD Housing Policy
Ben Stephenson, MSD (part of meeting)
Amanda Lewis, MSD Housing Policy

Key points

The following key points are from the notes taken at the working group session with council housing/homelessness policy staff on 23 August 2018.

A write up of the detailed notes taken on the day starts on page 3.

Session 1: Information/data on the homeless population

- Councils attending the workshop had all collected some information on the without shelter homeless population in their area. Data collection been done in many different ways, either as a one off or with varying frequency.
- Tauranga Council was the only council that had developed a by-name list. The list is now being maintained by Housing First providers.
- There was support for regular and consistent data coordinated centrally on characteristics of the population, drivers, length and history of homelessness (the 'individual story').
- At a local level better data could inform councils' housing/homeless strategies and plans, bring attention to issues and help develop preventative measures.
- Some places already have a significant amount of data (but it can't necessarily be shared).
- Many challenges were identified, including:
 - ensuring accuracy
 - the level of resourcing required for a regular count
 - how to get good information from a short survey (for PIT)
 - privacy and ethical considerations (including raising expectations around housing)
 - engaging and building trust with people experiencing homelessness
 - the balance between putting resources into collecting data vs providing services.

Session 2: Investigating a count for NZ – approach

- There was no clear winner in terms of which approach councils thought should be used for a regular count in NZ.
- There was discussion on whether 'one size fits all' – it was agreed that consistency in the data collected was important.
- The availability of services to respond to homelessness was a key consideration – particularly when using the by-name approach.
- There was no real support for a straight count (i.e. a PIT that didn't collect data/information other than numbers).
- Undercounting and being resource intensive were considered limitations of both methods.
- A count could potentially start in the major centres first (or Housing First locations) before considering a broader roll-out.
- A count would need a clear purpose, agreed definitions, central guidance and support, consistency around the information collected (but not necessarily a consistent method of gathering).

Session 3: Investigating a count for NZ – potential roles

- There was support for a collaborative approach – involving key organisations and groups in partnership to deliver a count in their area
- Councils are likely to want to be actively involved in planning and delivering a count.
- Some ideas around the potential role of Councils included: providing resourcing (especially staff resource), monitoring and research, generating support and buy-in, awareness raising and data analysis.
- Some ideas around the potential role of central government included: an oversight role, standardisation, guidance, funding, engagement, media and support, and setting policy.
- Other organisations could potentially provide leadership at the local level, possibly in partnership with councils, government agencies and other groups.
- There is a long list of other organisations with local knowledge who might want to be involved in counts in their area.

Detailed notes from the sessions

1. What information do you already have and what are the gaps?

Christchurch

- Chch has previously carried out a by name count but the feeling is this underestimated hidden homeless, esp female homeless and people in suburbs
- Would like to repeat count
- Mixed accounts coming from service providers
- How will a count work with HF? How complement what required from HF providers?
- Information from by name count in 2017 involving some service providers (e.g. Methodist Mission) and community organisations

Hamilton

- Anecdotal evidence – often begging confused with homelessness
- Hamilton has youth research – working with organisations (has a working group)
- Social housing register – is there duplication or gaps in terms of numbers? E.g. double counting
- Information from night shelter funded by council on bed nights per year (shelter has 27 beds, high levels of repeats)
- No EH outside of night shelter
- The People's Project - a home for everyone

Tauranga

- Freedom camping patrols found people sleeping rough – led to a by name list approach, involved social workers, got to know each person, built up trust, “the art of engagement”
- Hidden number, women likely to be less visible, used shelter information
- Risk – raising expectations of rough sleepers and public, but unable to supply housing (instead referred to community church provider)
- Other information comes from Council employed security
- Tauranga is continuing with by name, but now with HF
- Can correlate list with HF
- HF is changing expectations
- Media and councillors prompted action
- Council is considering bylaws re. begging and rough sleeping in vicinity of commercial premises
- Rachael Hatch research report (PIT resources)

Whanganui

- Early stages of responding to homelessness
- Service providers can sometimes provide conflicting accounts
- Council trying to be restorative
- Council report S Dee
- Safe Whanganui group – strategy has housing goals/pillars
- Preparing report on housing as a step towards developing a strategy

Wellington

- Te Mahana homelessness strategy (being reinvigorated)
- Named list compiled when Te Mahana was being developed
- Issue of begging vs rough sleeping
- People sleeping in cars – less visible, more dispersed, move around
- Councils works with/funds DCM

Hutt City Council

- Survey conducted electronically + physical copies – experience of homeless people
- Hutt Valley did a count of people well enough to be released but had nowhere to go – big issue for the mental health unit.

Nelson

- Survey on needs + experience of homeless men – male room

General or multiple councils

- Police – see people on the streets – in conversation they tell councils. Not recorded officially (Hutt City and Whanganui)
- Members of the public ring the council – people sleeping in cars and parks. Officers often know they are homeless, usually not recorded
- Social Housing Register numbers. There is a gap – those not engaging with MSD – and lists households, not individuals.
- DHBs hold some information
- Anecdotal evidence – housing support/providers/advice. They tend to have good information on those exiting prison and mental health units.
- Complaints to the council and infringement data give information.

2. What sort of information would be the most useful, and how often would it need to be updated?

- The hidden homeless – those not visible on the streets
- Comparison of scale of homelessness across regions
- Consistent data
- Measuring over time – how are we tracking?
- Questions around drivers, the underlying issues
- Length of homelessness
- Demographic characteristics of homeless population
- Need to clarify purpose of information gathering – what is the response?
- National level – information for benchmarking
- Local level – individualised response at community level
- Responses could be very different depending on characteristics
- Number of episodes – chronic vs episodic
- Information over longer timeframes – understanding effects of policy changes, changes in housing affordability etc
- Prison data – outcomes of people leaving prison
- At reporting level, don't need names
- Service interaction history important
- Data that can inform central govt policy
- Named lists are more resource intensive
- Severity of homelessness – can it be measured?
- Frequency could be real-time, 6-monthly, annual (some suggestions that annual probably most useful for Council purposes)
- Some councils already have a significant amount of data
- Data needs depend on role of council – how hands on will they be in terms of funding services?
- Standardised data/reporting
 - Allow comparison
 - Detailed drivers to tell story

3. How could information be used by your council?

Note: this is also covered in some responses to Question 1

- Better data could inform planning and strategies
 - Set performance outcomes – annual
- Long term plan – 10 year plans updated every 3 years, plus annual plans
- Funding rounds – generally for initiatives requiring significant funding
- Influencing landlords, developers, viewing impact on town and economy – bringing attention to issues/needs for councillors and towns
- See how interventions are working
- Understand individual journey – ‘end homelessness for individuals’ as opposed to ‘end homelessness’
- Increase focus on prevention

4. What might the main challenges of collecting regular information be?

- Resource intensive – by name takes effort and time
- Resource for outreach
- PIT – ability to get information in a short amount of time (i.e. survey)
- Identifying the resource needed
- At what point do you think you have an idea of the number?
- Engagement – who can do it?
- The art of engagement – it needs people who have built up relationships over time; people with skill/training in engagement
- Building expectations (public/community and rough sleepers) that can't be met
- The deeper information is much more valuable – how to get the rich picture of characteristics and drivers?
- Getting genuine and accurate information
- Where do you invest energy/effort?
 - To get a number for benchmarking?
 - To get people the help they need/permanent housing?
- Need to get consent for sharing personal information
- Data privacy + sharing can make finding out more about people from social providers difficult
 - A lot of information exists
 - May be a case of asking questions in different ways
 - Administrative burden
- Hidden homeless – overcrowding/couch surfing
 - Not a homogenous group
- Sharing data to get overall picture – how to bring together and centralise
 - Every council has different systems
 - Privacy
 - Is this organisational? Potential to work through this – if asking consent.
 - Can have good data about size and scale without personalised data – can use unique identifiers
- Seasonal variation is an issue (winter vs summer) – and 1 day is not representative for a count

Pressures leading to homelessness

- Whanganui – home ownership rate high – usually a good thing, but means a lack of rental property – plus high Bookabach/AirBnB
- Mental health + addiction – threshold for help too high – need for wraparound support
- Released prisoners – face discrimination by landlords/letting agencies (also issues of pets, lacking referees, bad credit records)
- Care leavers and young people
- Racial discrimination

5. Strengths and limitations of by name and PIT approaches

Point in time strengths

- Flexibility around survey/no survey
- Could use a sample size and take a qualitative approach
- There can be options for people who need immediate assistance (accommodation or services)
- Benchmarking
- Snapshot for resourcing requirements
- Survey could be app based or web based
- An independent organisation leading a PIT count could mean better credibility
- Opportunity for rich info through survey
- More comparable data
- Publicity value – raise awareness

Point in time limitations

- Does the person want to answer a survey? – there is no second chance to talk to them some other time
- Possibility of undercounting and double counting
- Short time frame for engagement
- Can be resource intensive to cover the area required
- Engaging with people – how willing will some people be to engage with someone they are only meeting with once for a short time
- Weather can impact numbers
- Safety issues for volunteers
- Volunteers should ideally come from sector engaging with rough sleepers (community meal providers, social workers etc) – but how many people are there with the right experience/expertise?
- Could be seen as counting for counting sake
- Geography – urban vs out of town
 - Need local intelligence
 - Hidden places – logistics for interviewers
- Privacy – respecting personal space
- What is done after – service response?
- Perception of interviewer – e.g. person wearing high vis identifying as police
- Day/time/weather can skew results – pay day, how they appear 'bedding down'

By name approach strengths

- Rich information gained on rough sleepers
- No time limit for engagement
- Longer time frame allows for multiple engagement to build up information (allows for time to build trust)
- Encourages agencies to work together
- Responses can be provided for each person
- Outreach can have an impact on levels of street begging
- Less coordination once established (BAU)
- Mutually beneficial
- See the individual's journey
- Can tap into whānau support

By name approach limitations

- It could take time to build up an understanding of the scale of homelessness
- Less ability to provide a snapshot
- Resource intensive/specialised resource
- This approach can build expectations around providing accommodation and support (when it might not be available)
- Undercounting
- Hard to compare across regions

6. What flexibility would be needed to carry out a count best suited to different locations?

- Do we need a count everywhere? It could depend on what it involves and the level of resource required
- Options for locations
 - HF locations
 - Major centres, population based
 - Everywhere
 - Start with a few locations and then expand
- Choice of approach might depend on where the funding comes from
- High level framework – talk to local communities how to implement a count in their area
- Focus on the majority first
- Local solutions for local people – communities – not necessarily councils
- Legislation?

7. What would be needed to achieve consistency

- Limit options between areas – or provide no options
- National level guidance and oversight
- Tap into agencies and their current outreach
- Magnet incentives – come to a place rather than invading privacy
- Perhaps a joint approach of PIT and by name
- Privacy limitations – people providing info about other people
- Correct resources – including involving people with lived experience
- Now what? Sell it!
- Clearly define the area that needs to be covered/where the count is – eg just cities? Region-wide?

- National resourcing available to councils
- Needs to be a priority to councils – buy in
- Support for regions, cities, rural

8. What options are there for the role that councils could potentially play in carrying out a count?

Councils

- Councils will likely want to be actively involved in counts in their area (councils have monitoring & research functions and have local community “on the ground” knowledge)
- In the case of HF, often councils are a member the Governance Group (chaired by elected members)
- Councils could commit people resourcing for a count
- Elected members could provide support and buy in
- Not all councils will have expertise – it will depend on scale
- Councils do not have specific funding – funding tagged to community development could contribute some people resourcing
- Coordination role
 - Community development aim? (consultation)
 - Policy
- Funding
- Political support
 - Endorsing
 - Connecting
- Using current resource
 - Surveillance cameras
 - City safety staff
 - Māori warders/community patrols
- Data analysis
- LGNZ involvement – conduit to local govt

Central government

- Oversight, standardisation, guidance, toolkit
- Monitoring and evaluation
- Central collection of data and reporting
- Generate media and support
- Funding for project management
- Central government needs to be clear on that they are trying to achieve and how local govt benefit from counts
- Policy
- Wider research
- H&S consideration and planning
- Ownership
- Engagement

Providers

- Could provide leadership and involve councils in collaborative partnership
- Project management and relationship management
- Access to people with experience in delivering HF programme for carrying out survey

Other organisations who could potentially be involved

- DHBS/PHOs
- Churches – Salvation Army
- Night shelter
- Soup kitchen
- Community services council – safety advisory boards, etc
- Marae
- Police
- Regional interagency networks or similar
- People with lived experience
- Volunteer groups/community volunteers
- Social work students
- Libraries
- Community hubs
- Iwi
- Whāuau groups
- Pacific groups
- Local businesses