Advising in Austerity

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Lucy was 25 years old and 13 weeks pregnant when she first became homeless following the non-payment of wages from a previous employer. Lucy actively sought advice and information about her housing rights and options from 11 different sources. Within this process, Lucy encountered a number of barriers which significantly impacted on the speed and ease with which she was able to access targeted advice.

The story

In 2014 Lucy moved from Scotland to the South of England to take up a new employment position. Upon arrival she was informed by her previous employer that they had decided not to release her holiday pay. Lucy depended on this money to put down a deposit on a new flat and as a result was left homeless and in a particularly vulnerable position:

‘I was pregnant, I had my suitcase, all of my belongings, I’d been carrying it around for three days now. I also have a heart condition, so I was prone to fainting, which is rubbish.’
Lucy initially approached the local authority at the main Customer Service Point (CSP) where she waited two and a half hours for an appointment. Since she lacked a connection to the local area, Lucy was turned away without an opportunity to speak to a housing options adviser. Staff at the CSP appeared unconcerned, unsympathetic and unwilling to provide even basic information:

‘I didn’t ask for anything, I asked for advice, even just a list of services … I didn’t go in there and say, “can you get me like a two-bedroomed flat, something really nice?” I literally just wanted to know advice about what I could do, like who I could talk to that could kind of give me a hand and they’re like, can’t really help you cos you’ve got no connection … so they didn’t even give me like a list of people to talk to or refer me to anybody else.’

Lucy felt that despite being a victim of unforeseen and uncontrollable circumstances, staff at the CSP appeared to assume that she had intentionally made herself homeless:

‘It was sort of like as if I’d thought it would be really funny if I tried to move down with £50 in my back pocket and 13 weeks pregnant and just see what happens.’

Lucy had volunteered for a homelessness shelter in Scotland prior to becoming homeless and was therefore aware of Shelter’s housing advice helpline. Lucy telephoned this helpline and was advised to visit her local Citizen’s Advice Bureau (CAB). Lucy argued that as “their [Scotland’s] homeless procedure is much different”, this volunteering experience had not helped to her to be aware of her housing rights and options.

Lucy visited the local CAB where she attended a gateway appointment. Lucy argued that at this point, the urgency of her situation and the prospect that help might not be available contributed to heightened feelings of anxiety and emotional distress:
CASE STUDY ONE

‘They gave me like a really small slot – which I understand and appreciate because they have to see an awful lot of people. So yeah, they saw me about 5 minutes … she said you’ve got no connections to Bristol, there’s not really a service that we think would help you.’

The gateway adviser provided Lucy with a booklet listing information on local services and general advice for homeless people. Lucy began to panic at the prospect of sleeping rough and as a result felt averse to using this particular information resource:

‘There was nothing they could really do to be honest. So it was kind of a panic but they gave me a little booklet, basically of “how to be homeless” and where to sleep and all that kind of stuff. And I was, like, I don’t want this, this is awful.’

Lucy was new to the local area and was therefore completely unaware of the nature and location of available services or how to go about accessing them. After leaving the CAB, Lucy tried using the computers at the local public library to find advice and information about her housing rights and options. However, lacking the local address required to obtain a library card, she was only given 15 minutes on a ‘guest computer’, a time period which was entirely insufficient to find the advice and information she needed. Lucy also attempted to locate services using one of the free public internet portals located throughout the city centre but was hardly surprised that this search was unsuccessful, stating that “obviously homeless provisions aren’t going to be on there”.

With the help of google maps on her phone and the booklet provided by CAB, Lucy eventually located a drop-in day centre catering to homeless and vulnerable people. Staff at this service advised Lucy to get a doctor’s note to confirm she was pregnant in order to increase her chances of being classified as being in priority need. The doctor however refused to see Lucy because she lacked a local address. Lucy then returned to the drop-in centre where staff
suggested she should go back to the doctor using them as a reference. After another long wait, the doctor still refused to see Lucy. This in turn had a particularly detrimental impact on Lucy’s psychological and emotional wellbeing:

‘At the doctor’s – if you’re pregnant, tearful and homeless, to be told, well, you haven’t got an address, we can’t see you, it was really really difficult.’

Lucy then approached the police for assistance, where she was provided with a telephone number for a local emergency accommodation service. This service informed Lucy that whilst “they would see what they could do”, due to her lack of local connection it was unlikely that she would be able to access any emergency accommodation. This particular service then failed to return Lucy’s phone call despite promising to do so.

Lucy had to walk around the city for several hours with all her belongings whilst looking for appropriate services and attending appointments. Being 13 weeks pregnant and suffering from a chronic heart condition, meant that this process proved particularly arduous and time-consuming. Lucy depended heavily on her smart phone for the purpose of navigating the city and to communicate with different services. A lack of places to charge her phone operated as a barrier, with Lucy having to limit the use of her phone in order to conserve the battery.

It was 17:45pm when Lucy left the doctors’ for the second time. As this point services were closing and Lucy began to worry that she would have to spend the night sleeping rough. Lucy then remembered that the Shelter helpline had given her the telephone number of the local Nightstop scheme. Nightstop subsequently provided her with emergency accommodation, advice and support.

Reflecting on her experience, Lucy argued that services were often difficult to find and inadequately advertised. The barriers Lucy experienced in her search for advice and information led her to
conceptualise advice as a scarce resource which appeared to be hidden from those lacking knowledge or experience:

‘Obviously people need to help themselves but you shouldn’t really have to kind of hide it from people. It’s like we’ll offer you services if you can find it.’