



# Simon Star

*Living and working with London's street homeless*

## News From Simon: A Busy Autumn



This autumn we have been running three community houses - at Anton Street in Hackney, at 129 Malden Road in Camden and Simon House in Brent - and have been providing accommodation for over twenty people. Our visits programme has been visiting and supporting 38 ex-homeless people in their own homes. The street work teams have been out (almost) every night and the early morning Tea Runs, evening Soup Runs and Street Cafés continue to serve hundreds of people every week. Thirteen members of the community went on the annual trip to Ireland in September. And over fifty supporters participated in our six-monthly head count of homeless people sleeping rough in central London. Unfortunately our finances have struggled to keep pace with all this activity and as from January we will be cutting back quite dramatically. Outreach and street work will remain the primary focus of our work but much of our residential work will have to be suspended.

The staff team has been dramatically reduced - Florian Maehler (our Finance Officer) and Sarah Cahill (our Fundraiser) who left us in the summer have not been replaced nor has Matt Scrimgeour (Simon House Project Manager) who left us in November. We are also reducing the number of full time residential volunteer workers which is now down to just ten and will be reduced to eight or less after Christmas.

Nevertheless we are looking for new resources and are determined to develop some new areas of work. We are particularly keen to re-open a night shelter to provide free emergency accom-

modation. This has been a serious gap in service provision - ever since the old Simon shelter at Kings Cross closed some years ago. We are applying for large grants and significant donations to support this work but in the meantime any smaller donations and gifts which we receive are much appreciated and will enable us to continue with our outreach services.

Mark Palframan  
Services Manager



*Anton Street*

# One Big Walk



Trudging the hundreds of miles from Inverness to Bournemouth through all weather, sleeping on couches, floors and once under a gorse bush, Barry Etheridge's 'One Big Walk' has sought to gain an understanding, and raise awareness of, the true state of homelessness service provision across the country. As the founder of Street People's Action and Awareness Group (SPAAG), and under the banner of SHELTER, Barry has visited nineteen homeless projects along his trek and will compile a report to present to parliament. He has generally found that service provision is woefully inadequate and trying to move through the system a largely disempowering and frustrating process. Barry visited the Simon Community Kentish Town project over a weekend to learn about the situation in London. Barry shared with community members his experiences along the way and also of his work within SPAAG. He spoke passionately about SPAAG's advocacy work, which helps street people in Bournemouth to navigate 'The System', and their involvement

in local politics as an uncompromised, and loud, voice for street people. SPAAG and the Simon Community share many of the same ideals and principles, and we will hopefully explore ways to share information and work together in the future.

[www.spaag.org](http://www.spaag.org)

Joanna Pankhurst  
Project Worker

THE  
*Simon*  
COMMUNITY

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*Simon  
Community  
Worker Duncan  
Gray chatting  
with External  
Member Percy  
Hudson in  
County Mayo on  
a trip generously  
sponsored by  
the Mayo  
Emigrant Liaison  
Committee*

# The Politics Of Hunger



Local authorities, together with some homelessness services, have begun using hunger and the denial of free food as a tool for coercing street homeless people into either co-operating with their plans or leaving the city. We are being criticised for continuing to give out free food to hungry homeless people as this undermines their strategy. But what about the people we are trying to help? Does it really make sense to deny them free food in the hope that they will respond in a positive way?

## **Combating Addiction**

Many of the people who use our soup run are in the grip of some form of addiction. Helping people address and overcome addictions is a complicated business and it is nonsense to maintain that by simply denying them free food they will suddenly spend their money on food rather than on gambling, drugs or alcohol. Nevertheless this was seriously asserted to me at a recent meeting. This fails to recognise that their addiction may have already caused them to lose their homes and possibly also caused a breakdown in their most important relationships. We believe in the principle of 'harm minimisation' and there is a basic humanitarian need to provide food for people who are sleeping on the streets and not eating properly. People then need encouragement and motivation to change if they are to seriously tackle their addictions and consequently we aim to get alongside people to build relationships and re-affirm their sense of self worth. In the long run this is a far more effective strategy than trying to starve them into co-operating with detox or rehab programmes!

## **The use of food deprivation in the care and treatment of the mentally ill (!)**

It is generally recognised that the majority of people sleeping on the streets have some mental health issues. Depression is the major problem and many of the people we are trying to help are extremely de-motivated and are not taking care of themselves. The denial of food simply doesn't work as a motivational tool in addressing depression. There are other people with more serious issues who are refusing to engage with mental health services and once again there is an expectation that if support is denied to them they will eventually be forced to co-operate

and either return to the appropriate psychiatric institution or resume taking their medication. This has not been our experience. Some of these people are quite distressed and whilst they cannot be detained against their will, as they are not a danger to others or even an immediate danger to themselves, they are still extremely vulnerable. And they still need to eat. And hopefully we can use this opportunity to build supportive relationships with them.

## **Immigration Control**

There is also now a co-ordinated attempt to use hunger as a form of immigration control. Up to a third of the people we are currently helping are from abroad. These include a lot of people from the new European Union countries but also others including those who might be here on work visa's but who have run out of money or people appealing or contesting claims for asylum or any number of other complicated personal reasons which have caused them to become destitute on the streets of London. These people might be quite legitimately in the country and often have serious personal reasons why they can't or won't return to their countries of origin but it is still repeatedly asserted that they would all be better off "back where they came from". Although not illegal they are seen as unwelcome and there now exists a deliberate policy of making life so unpleasant for them that they will leave the UK. The current government has been quite up front about this and recent legislative changes have reinforced it. By providing free food and gentle support we are indeed undermining this strategy.

## **"I was hungry and you gave me food." Matthew 25 v35**

It is quite offensive that some senior figures both within local authorities and even in the homelessness industry itself are now quite openly espousing a policy that seeks to use hunger as a coercive tool. We too want to encourage people off the streets and to take up the services and support which are available for them but this cannot, and should not, be done through these politics of hunger. Some people still need free food and we will continue to provide this.

## **Mark Palframan**

Services Manager, The Simon Community

# Simon Invited To European Conference On Homelessness



I was delighted to be able to represent Simon at a conference which was held in the beautiful University City of Wroclaw in Poland. The conference took place over three days from the 12th to the 14th of October, and was organised by FEANTSA, an international organisation based in Brussels which represents Non Government Organisations from across Europe working in the field of homelessness and social exclusion.

The conference was attended by voluntary organisations and civil servants from as far a field as Portugal and Greece. We were welcomed by the Mayor of Wroclaw who recently spoke about the mass exodus of Poles from his city to countries such as the UK, and Ireland, in search of work and a better life.

The conference theme was "A Right to Health is a Human Right" which led to great debate amongst the many hundreds of delegates who converged on the city from across Europe. I raised the issue of migration from the new accession states to the old member states as one of the key issues facing the homelessness sector given that there is no safety net in place for those who end up in difficulties, and that grass roots homelessness charities such as Simon are picking up the pieces.. No one doubts that the health implications for those affected are serious. A senior member of the Polish Senate met with me in the afternoon to express her concern, and said that the European Treaty was being breached..

The Director of FEANTSA also invited me to participate in the special meeting of senior Civil Servants which took place during the three day conference.. I was invited to give an overview of the situation in London from the view point of a homelessness charity working at the grass roots concerning migration and homelessness.. I spoke about people ending up in the UK without any money and ill prepared for the migration process. I also mentioned that the economy is benefiting

enormously from the current wave of migration. however, the situation had become open season for those who are in the business of exploitation, and that we within Simon had come across numerous people



*London Eye & Poland*

from Poland who had fallen into the hands of unscrupulous employers and gang masters. The head of the Homeless Agency in Ireland also spoke of the situation across Ireland and stated that more than 200,000 people had arrived since accession day 2004. Just like in the UK, many are working, but many people are also ending up in difficulty relying on soup runs and day centres just to stay alive.

Such issues cannot be solved through charitably funded work alone; there must be a co-ordinated approach from both central government and the European Union. The Simon Community will continue to campaign for those in greatest need, and therefore your donations are very important to us.

**Philip Burke**  
Trustee.

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# Simon Community: A Personal Reflection

## by Alan Cole, Trustee

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### **The Simon Community was founded on the 3rd of September 1963, by Anton Wallich-Clifford.**

Anton was the head Probation Officer at Bow Street Magistrates Court, his Mother was head Magistrate in Sussex.

It was his Mother that persuaded him to do what he dreamt to do and that was to help the homeless and vulnerable peoples so he left the Probation Service to start his new venture.

On the date above he opened 129, Malden Road, Kentish Town, it was given the name St Josephs House Of Hospitality, and to this day we still have the house.

At the time St., Josephs was opened I was working in Edinburgh in the Simon night shelter, under the guidance of Father Anthony Ross who was the Edinburgh University Chaplain as well as being the Administrator for Edinburgh Simon.

Outreach has always been first priority in Simon so after Anton and M.T.s wedding I was asked to come to London and take charge of the soup run with a man called Tony Miles who was Anton,s stepson. The soup run was only going out twice a week, Anton said if we cannot increase the run to seven days a week it was not worth doing, because a man or woman needs to be fed seven days a week not two

To have a soup run seven days a week you need money and manpower so Tony and myself started going to shops and markets to beg vegetables and whatever else we could beg eventually we were getting enough ingredients to cover the runs, now we had to get volunteers to help us. We were lucky one of the volunteers suggested we contact Monsieur Bruce Kent at Gower Street Chaplaincy and ask if any of his students could help us do the soup runs.

About two weeks later we got a letter from the Chaplaincy inviting Tony and myself to go there and give a talk on the Simon Community and what the students would be doing if they agreed

to help apart from the soup runs. We gave the talk and we got around 70 to80 volunteers not all for the soup run, some would do cleaning others would take the residents shopping, for walks, or for drives

About two months later everything was going fine, regular volunteers coming in at least twice a week soup run seven days a week.

Now that the soup run was running smoothly we decided to broaden our horizon and ask a few of our volunteers to do streetwork because when we are on soup runs you dont have the time for a proper chat to everyone, but on streetwork you could devote one night to one person

The one thing I forgot to tell you is when Anton started the Simon Community he stated under no circumstances would Simon accept any money from the Government, the monies we got would be from the people who wanted to help, but not from any Government department

Streetwork through the years has not changed that much our main aim is to keep in contact with people on the street and to support them as much as possible if they want it. The Simon Community has still got the same aims as it had when it started back in 1963 we are still a independent charity depending on donations from independent sources and I hope after reading this you may be persuaded to donate something.

One thing I would like to say before I finish is we have got fourteen full time volunteers who live eat and sleep with the homeless for anything up to eighteen months for a few pounds pocket money each week

To finish I hope you see what we are trying to do and I hope you can help us in some way We have been doing our outreach now for forty three years with your help and I hope it will continue.

Thank you for your help so far we are eternally grateful and we hope it will continue.

# Simon Community helps to establish the Polish British Mission for Employment

As highlighted in previous editions of Simon Star, the Simon Community has, for a couple of years, been increasingly concerned about the rising number of people from the new EU countries ending up homeless on the streets of London. As a result the Simon Community along with fellow organisation Housing Justice Unleash, contacted a leading Polish NGO called the Barka Foundation, to see if they could offer assistance in helping to avert a crisis on London's streets.

When the European Union expanded in May 2004, the UK along with Ireland and Sweden opened its labour market to the new EU countries of Poland, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Slovenia. It did not at the same time, however offer to open its social security provisions for work migrants, meaning that should any find themselves in difficulties once they had arrived in the UK there was a glaring lack of any form of safety net for them. The Simon Community had been increasingly concerned that on any one of its outreach programmes, Simon volunteers would see up to a third of the people being from the new EU countries. Not only were people from countries like Poland faced with social exclusion,

but furthermore, as they had no access to benefits, they were ineligible to access homelessness hostels, even though there is still a glaring lack of provision of acceptable hostel spaces in London. The Simon Community received reports from a number of other homelessness agencies, including the Dellow Centre in East London, the Manna Centre in South London, and the Upper Room in

West London, who stated that numbers of people accessing their services from Central and Eastern Europe were high, and that there was very little if anything that could be done to support them as they were doubly discriminated against under the Accession Treaty signed by the UK government.

People from the new EU countries are warmly welcomed by the UK authorities to come and work here, but because the social security system is only available to them once they have been in employment here for a year, making national insurance contributions, then there is a real concern for those for whom things do not work out. Access to a range of services including emergency hostels, is dependent upon access to benefits which raises concern that there is no obvious way for supporting EU work migrants who end up street homeless away from the streets.



A few weeks back I met a young Polish couple (we will call them Jarek and Gosia). They had been working in London for one of the large hotels. They had been earning £1.90 per hour, working 70 hours per week. They had a room in shared accommodation. Then Jarek was attacked one night. He wasn't able to return to work for a few days. By the time he was able to, he discovered that his job had gone. Unable to keep up with their rent payments, they were illegally evicted by their landlord. Whilst on the streets, they were attacked a couple of times. When I saw them, they were very scared, and uncertain about where to go. With the help of



a translator, we were able to get them a few nights accommodation, so that they had the opportunity to get warm, showered, and able to apply for a few jobs. Having secured employment, they were able to find a further room to live in. They however were two of the lucky ones.

Along with Housing Justice and the Barka Foundation, the Simon Community have established the Polish British Mission for Employment, to raise the issue of the plight of homeless work migrants in the UK, and to explore solutions to help people to socially integrate, and to help people away from the streets and into employment.

We are calling on the UK government to comply with its treaty obligations and to provide advice and support through the Job Centre Plus to help work migrants to find employment, rather than simply refer them to homelessness agencies thus making it harder for them to ever find employment.

We are calling on the Polish and other governments to have public awareness campaigns, to raise the many challenges work migrants will encounter when moving to the UK, such as how expensive the UK is, what rights and entitlements they have and so on.

We are also raising this issue at a European level, as we recognise that this is not just an issue affecting Poland and Britain, but that there are many work migrants across the EU with no social security net to support them. We would like to see the European Union fund resources in all member states to support work migrants who fall into difficulty to help them away from social exclusion and able to get themselves secure with the employment and accommodation they migrated to secure.



*Simon Community Co-worker and trustee Bill Moore, relaxing during the trip to County Mayo, Ireland in September of this year*

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