



## Ending street homelessness: What's the problem?

### Notes from the Indaba, Bloomsbury Baptist Church, Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> February

'Indaba' – a Zulu word meaning a council or meeting to discuss important business

#### Introductions:

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The INDABA was facilitated by Andy Benson, who explained that the meeting would follow Chatham House rules i.e. views and opinions expressed in the meeting would not be attributed to a particular person or organisation. All participants were allocated a table to sit, and invited to introduce themselves. Alastair Murray then presented a short history of street homelessness to set the context.

Following this, each table was asked to discuss the question 'Ending street homelessness: What's the problem?' and then report back to the whole meeting. After a break a second discussion would take place to identify solutions to these problems, followed by a plenary discussion at the end.

#### Discussion part I: What's the Problem?

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##### *General*

The varied needs of rough sleepers require a wide range of responses.

Lack of legal entitlements for many who are homeless e.g. Europeans from the accession states and others with no recourse to public funds

Not enough emergency accommodation. The question of who would be responsible for such emergency accommodation was raised i.e. local authorities or the local community.

Street homelessness should be seen as a society wide problem. At the moment it seems there are a number of different agencies (the government, commissioned charities and independent charities) all with the same aim, but all with different approaches.

It is a problem that needs a long term approach in order that relationships can be built, and individual responses tailored.

##### *Services*

Homelessness services are not always available to people in the area where they have lived, and tend to be clustered in Central London. The idea that each community should provide their own response to the problem on their own doorstep was discussed.

There is a need for better coordination of services, as at the moment they often have different agendas and can overlap without proper communication. Provision of services is not as effective as it could be.

Organisations are often too quick to put people into services when perhaps this is not the best solution. This can lead to people being labelled long term as homeless, increasing institutionalisation.

Hostels are often perceived by rough sleepers as intimidating places and an undesirable option. This is a huge problem as it means that for many individuals unwilling to enter a hostel, because it appears unsafe and unpleasant, sleeping on the streets is a rational decision.

The lack of uniform mental health assessment and provision means that individuals are often lost in the system when they most need help.

There is a tension between giving support in the way in which it is wanted and giving it in the way it is deemed, by organisations, to be needed. Options are often taken out of the individual's control and the approach to helping rough sleeps is not as client-centred as it should be. There are sometimes assumptions made by service providers which point to a lack of respect towards the people they are dealing with.

### *Residents in areas used by rough sleepers*

Residents in areas where there are a high proportion of rough sleepers and service users are affected e.g. community safety concerns. Although this represents a different end of the spectrum of problems surrounding ending street homelessness, it is an important issue to address

### *Moving on*

There are a lack of 'move on' options available to organisations who are trying to help homeless people.

### *Resources*

Resources are not being managed properly and it is important to look into whether there are too few resources available, or even too many. The problem of gaps in resource availability was also discussed.

Cuts to funding will lead to a greater flow of people becoming homeless. Organisations are going to need more resources and better management of resources.

Endemic problems in the social care system, the housing system, prisons, and schools (amongst others) mean that street homelessness is likely to persist, and possibly worsen if these problems are not addressed.

Funding and commissioning of services is perceived as very top down in its approach, and failing to take into account the views and opinions of the people it is meant to be helping.

### *Perceptions of homelessness*

There is a problem of public perception of homelessness which is often lacking in information and which is not conducive to communities taking responsibility for problems on their own doorstep.

### *No recourse to public funds*

Some rough sleepers, such as those from Central and Eastern European, have limited or no recourse to benefits. Although some organisations offer help, there is still a major long term problem:

whether they are able to get work, or whether they should be helped to return to their country of origin. There is also a language problem, especially in day centres and hostels.

### *Zero target*

Combined with the media focus on 2012, this means that often it is the quickest route to ending homelessness that is chosen by the authorities, and that this might not be the best route. The issue of enforcement and Operation Poncho was raised

## Discussion Part 2: Solutions

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### *General*

Instead of a reactive first aid approach, a proactive approach would take the form of plugging the gaps in the social care system, the criminal justice system, etc. to reduce the likelihood that an individual might become homeless.

The voluntary sector has the capacity to be more ambitious. If a more complete approach to organisation of the voluntary sector was taken, then it would be possible to cut out the number of referrals made for one person. There was some disagreement, however, whether this unified approach would be helpful, or even possible, given the differing ideological backgrounds of the organisations involved. It was agreed that aiming to provide lots of small solutions would be a good way forward, along with establishing communities where people would be able to find worth and value.

More cooperation is needed between different services, such as the police, social services and the health care system, to find solutions to a problem which affects all of them.

It is essential to involve service users in decisions about services.

### *Services & resources*

Quicker, better assessment of needs is required: a triage service, as in hospital A & E.

Immediate emergency accommodation should be available to everyone regardless of circumstances or entitlements.

Smaller, specialist hostels are vital to meet the complex needs of individuals, along with more rehabilitation and detox services. Extra resources are needed to address dual or complex diagnosis for rough sleepers with mental health problems combined with substance or alcohol issues.

The return of direct access hostels would be welcomed.

More coordination between statutory and grass roots organisations is needed, in order for resources to be used effectively. It was also stressed that challenging current service provision needs to take place on a local level.

Coordination of services across boroughs to prevent rough sleepers having to continually 'hopscotch' between boroughs in order to make use of a complete range of services, and to reduce 'service migration'. A 'pan-London' approach is required.

Arguments about the roles of amateurs as compared to professional service providers are unhelpful and unedifying. Barriers need to be broken down between these two perspectives, so that more work can be done towards finding a solution.

There needs to be greater flexibility in health services as at the moment it is very difficult to establish a stable relationship between homeless people and the services they need, because the health service is often very inflexible in its approach.

Also stressed was the basic premise that no one should ever be discharged on to the street.

### *Need for cross sector relationships*

There is a need for better and stronger cross sector relationships in order to provide 'joined up' services for clients with complex needs. Forums in local communities are part of the answer, where different service providers come together to discuss their responses.

This also extends to the need for organisations to reach out for cooperate funding/sponsorship which can help to replace government funding where necessary.

### *Accountability of service providers*

A suggestion was made that in order to help service providers take ownership of the problems that they are supposed to be dealing with, their work, and the success if their work, could be linked to funding.

### *Personalisation*

An approach that has proved successful in other areas, personalisation could be used to strengthen relationships between clients and service providers. It was suggested that improvements could be made by attaching budgets to individuals rather than organisations on a short term, person led basis. It also places emphasis on an assertive approach to helping rough sleepers.

### *Reconnections*

Reconnecting people sleeping on the streets to their place/country of origin and establishing connections to this area before attempting any relocation. It was recognised that this might involve difficult conversations but that these were conversations that had to take place. The importance of a discussion about realistic options was emphasised, but it was also emphasised that clients should be asked what it was that they wanted to get out of the situation.

Some background was given regarding the GLA's 'No Second Night Out' initiative which is aimed at ensuring no one new to rough sleeping will ever spend a second night out on the streets, in part by reconnecting them with their place of origin if it is thought that there could be help for them there.

### *Enforcement*

Government and police led enforcement was raised, and the question of whether this was a valid approach. This included whether it would be profitable to ban begging and what the knock on effects of this might be. If policy decisions are going to be taken in these areas then it is important that these are well thought out, and that all the possible consequences are considered.

### *Referral rights & access to data*

More organisations, such as night shelters, need to have the rights to refer service users on to the services that can help them. At the moment there is hegemony of organisations with referral rights. Likewise, more organisations need to be able to have access to information about service users, and it should be recognised that grass roots organisations have valuable information to share as well.

### *Housing*

What are the housing options currently available to rough sleepers? There needs to be more social lettings agencies, landlord forums and ownership of the housing problem by the authorities and local communities.

## Plenary Discussion

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Following the report backs from the discussions noted above, the floor was opened up for a more general discussion regarding what had been said, and how this could be taken further. The following briefly summarises the main points of this discussion.

### *Inclusive Approach*

It was felt that breaking down the barriers between professionals and clients is very important, especially as, for a number of rough sleepers, dealing with authority figures is difficult and stressful, and that it is important that both clients and service providers feel free to speak their mind about how a solution to ending homelessness might be found.

Many of the solutions suggested today were the same as those proposed by the recent Homeless People's Commission.

### *Prevention*

Organisations should be concentrating their efforts on the prevention of homelessness, rather than simply trying to deal with it once it has happened on a short term basis, that does little to prevent a return to living on the streets.

### *Conflict or Agreement?*

It was felt by some that whilst there is general agreement on many issues there are genuine differences of opinion about causes and solutions. Agreeing to disagree might actually be more constructive, as different organisations often had very different ideological backgrounds, and solutions might more readily be found a combination of approaches. However it was felt by some that continued debate might hamper the reaching of a solution.

### *Going forward*

It was noted that there was no representation from statutory agencies e.g. local authorities. This should be remedied if possible for future meetings. Otherwise it is voluntary organisations trying to address problems that are the responsibility of statutory organisations.

It was generally agreed that a further meeting emphasising differences in approaches to the problem of ending street homeless would be useful.

The strength of such gatherings lies in the diversity of the people present and the organisations which they represent. As complex a problem as homelessness needs a pluralistic approach – it is hoped that this tension will be a creative force that drives cooperation between organisations to find new and effective solutions.

## Further Information

Simon Community [www.simoncommunity.org.uk](http://www.simoncommunity.org.uk) Housing Justice [www.housingjustice.org.uk](http://www.housingjustice.org.uk)