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Street homelessness eradication strategies

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Introduction

I would like to congratulate Prof. Vranken on a very useful and balanced summary of the rough sleeping strategy. I have had the opportunity to comment on drafts of his paper and most of my comments have been incorporated in it, so this note merely highlights what I think are the key points in the success of the strategy, gives some brief information on programmes to prevent homelessness and identifies possible future developments.

Key factors in reducing rough sleeping

While a series of initiatives between 1990 and 1998 had some success in reducing rough sleeping, the numbers had reached a plateau that was still too high. The programme from 1999 was successful in reducing the number by more than two thirds because it was more focused and comprehensive than previous programmes.

Research found that a number of problems were preventing the further reduction in the number of people sleeping rough:

- In some areas there were not enough hostel beds for people sleeping rough, so even if they decided to move off the streets, a bed might not be immediately available.
- Longer term rough sleepers had become habituated to the way of life and a street culture was reinforced in some areas by large groups of people sleeping rough. Some people with serious drug, alcohol and mental health problems were too chaotic in their life styles to consider change without strong encouragement and support.
- A significant proportion, around a third of people sleeping rough, said they would not accept a hostel bed even if it was available. In part this was because of previous bad experiences in hostels, particularly in those with shared dormitories and those which did not allow alcohol on the premises.
- Most people sleeping rough had stayed in hostels in the past but had returned to sleeping rough, often because they were using hostels simply as a respite from the streets, rather than a step towards secure housing and re-integration. Many had also been evicted from hostels for breaking the rules.
- Even when people were rehoused from hostels into secure homes, many were unable to manage a tenancy and became homeless again.



The key developments in tackling these problems were:

- A clear and inescapable numerical target, set by the Prime Minister, of a reduction in the number of people sleeping rough of at least two thirds within three years.
- A method of measurement (the one night street count) that is broadly agreed by participants to be valid and sufficiently accurate for its purpose, while being fairly easy to implement.
- A commitment of sufficient government funding to achieve the target.
- The setting up of a specific government unit to co-ordinate and fund the programme.
- Contracts for voluntary agencies (NGOs) which gave them responsibility for achieving the targets within defined geographical areas.
- Joint work between central government departments, local authorities and other local agencies. This unit closely monitored progress towards the target and intervened when necessary to modify the programme and its implementation.
- A new style of street outreach work, carried out by NGOs, which is described in Prof. Vranken's paper. The key difference from previous work is a much more assertive approach to people sleeping rough. Previously some teams had offered services and encouraged people to take them up, but had accepted that many might refuse services, perhaps for several years. The new approach is much more active in persuading people that it is not acceptable for them to stay on the streets when decent accommodation and support is available for them.
- The provision of a sufficient number of good standard hostel beds. Unless these are available for people sleeping rough at the time they are prepared to accept them, then street outreach work cannot be successful.
- Hostels which accept people with drug, alcohol and mental health problems. For example, many hostels now allow residents to drink alcohol in some parts of the hostel. Previously most did not allow this with the result that many people would refuse a hostel bed or would be evicted if found drinking alcohol.
- The provision of skilled professional support to people in hostels with needs such as drug, alcohol and mental health problems, to try to ensure that residents did not return to sleeping rough.
- Work with residents in hostels to prepare them for the responsibilities of maintaining a permanent home.



- Ensuring that permanent homes are available for those who are ready to move. These are usually homes in the social rented sector, owned by local authorities or housing associations, which are non-profit NGOs.
- q Providing support to vulnerable tenants for as long as they need it to ensure they do not lose their tenancy.

Preventing homelessness

Research has identified a range of risk factors which increase the risk of homelessness¹. These include:

- Disputes with parents and step parents.
- Experience of physical or sexual abuse.
- Time in local authority care as a child.
- Lack of qualifications.
- School exclusion.
- Unemployment
- Alcohol and drug abuse.
- Mental health problems.
- A combination of mental health, drug and alcohol problems.
- Contact with the criminal justice system.
- Previous service in the armed forces.
- Marital or relationship breakdown.
- Previous experience of homelessness.
- Lack of a social support network.
- Failure to furnish or maintain a home.
- Debts, especially rent or mortgage arrears.
- Causing nuisance to neighbours.

The key crisis points which can precipitate rough sleeping are:

- Leaving the parental home after arguments.
- Leaving care without adequate support.
- Leaving prison.
- Marital or relationship breakdown.
- A financial crisis of mounting debts.
- Eviction from a rented or owned home.
- A sharp deterioration in mental health or an increase in alcohol abuse.

1 Randall G and Brown S, (1999), *Prevention is better than cure*, Crisis, London



There is a wide range of services which help to prevent homelessness. The key services are:

- Education in schools on homelessness and leaving home.
- Advice services for young people.
- Family mediation services for young people in dispute with their families.
- Services to help people return to accommodation in their home areas.
- Extended and improved support for young people leaving local authority care.
- Support for people in contact with the criminal justice system.
- Support for people at risk of losing their home.
- Multiple services and inter-agency work provided through day centres and advice centres.
- Befriending and mentoring services to tackle social isolation.
- Resettlement services for people leaving the armed forces.
- Specialist support for young people and women.

Future developments

The following are my personal views on how the programme should develop.

- Some local authorities are now developing programmes to help and encourage a wider group of street people, many of whom are not homeless or sleeping rough, but who engage in street activities such as begging, drug use and drinking in groups. These strategies build on the approach developed in the rough sleeping programme, but also have a more active involvement of the police. They adopt a graduated approach which ensures good quality services are available and which encourages people to access accommodation and support, while ensuring that activities such as begging and street drinking (which are illegal in certain circumstances) are not tolerated. People are offered help repeatedly before any legal action is taken. It has been found that the great majority do want to access services such as drug treatment and that legal action is only necessary in a small number of cases. Even if they are arrested, this can lead to more productive outcomes than imprisonment. For example, Drug Treatment and Testing Orders offer offenders the option of engaging with drug treatment programmes rather than going to prison. These programmes should be developed further.



- There is still a need to improve the standard of support offered in many hostels and to reduce the number of residents returning to rough sleeping. We are currently working with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister to develop an inspection regime for hostels which will enable local authorities to raise standards in them.
- Tenancy support should continue to be developed, identifying best practice and extending it to tenants who are at risk of homelessness, as well as those who have been homeless in the past.
- Work to prevent homelessness is still relatively under-developed and there is a need to develop a wide range of projects and to develop means of evaluating their effectiveness, including their cost effectiveness.