



United Kingdom 2004

**European Public
Social Platform**

**Street homelessness
eradication strategies**

Comment Paper, EPSP





Introduction

This paper outlines the views of the European Public Social Platform (EPSP) for the Peer Review Group Meeting in the London on the 5 and 6 May 2004. This paper will present an analysis of the report by the thematic expert Professor Jan Vranken (University of Antwerp, Belgium) which focuses on the UK government's rough sleeper's strategy which applies in England and Wales and forms the basis for discussion at the 5-6 May meeting.

Background

The UK saw a growing number of people sleeping rough in the 1980's and 1990's. A head count undertaken in 1998 indicated that on average 1,850 individuals were sleeping rough on the streets of England every night. To address this increase the UK Government undertook research into the issue and a report by the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) in 1998 set out a strategy for tackling rough sleeping in England and Wales.

The Rough Sleepers Initiative (RSI) approach was different in Scotland. It started a year earlier in 1997 and its target was to remove the need to sleep rough by the end of 2003. From 1997 to December 2003 £40 million was invested in the RSI strategy. The George Street Research commissioned by the Scottish Executive showed that there were 500 sleeping rough in Scotland in May 2001 and that this had reduced to 328 in October 2003. This research also showed that using a crude analysis there were slightly more people sleeping rough than there were available beds.

Rough sleeping is one of the most extreme manifestations of homelessness and social exclusion. The UK Government set a target of the reduction of rough sleeping by two thirds (a maximum of 620 people) by April 2002. The strategy intends to reduce the number of people sleeping rough to a minimum, to prevent 'newcomers' from joining the population, and to guarantee the lasting integration of former 'rough sleepers' into society.

It is difficult to clearly identify the goals and targets of this 'rough sleeping' strategy. However,

- goals and targets are defined on several 'levels';
- the relation between goals and targets on these different levels is not always clear;



- goals and targets seem to have been adapted, specified or 're-prioritised' during this period - although not in the sense of numerical outcomes.

However, the EPSP considers that a menu of targets and goals for this type of issue is needed as homelessness is caused by a combination of factors and is not a single issue subject. The reasons that people are unable to sustain tenancies are often social (e.g. relationship breakdown), emotional (e.g. mental health problems) and financial (e.g. unemployment). These underlying factors therefore need to be addressed at the same time as the issue of housing if people are to be kept off the streets.

The Rough Sleepers Strategy sets out six key principles which are to:

- tackle the root causes of rough sleeping.
- pursue approaches that help people off the streets, and reject those which sustain a street lifestyle.
- focus on those most in need.
- never give up on the most vulnerable.
- help rough sleepers to become active members of the community.
- be realistic about what we can offer those who are capable of helping themselves.

Which aspects of the EU Social Inclusion strategy are addressed by the strategy?

Since the EU Social Inclusion Strategy defines social inclusion as a multidimensional phenomenon, many facets of the rough sleeping strategy are being addressed. It is not only about the main field addressed by the NAP/Incl - employment, education, housing, and health – but also about the approach that was used in the rough sleeping strategy: the use of (quantitative) indicators, its preventative character, the co-operation between public administration and NGO. Some dimensions could be strengthened in the strategy, such as participation of the target group.

Success of the policy

The policy has been successful. The number of rough sleepers reported in the last national head count in June 2003 was 504 and this decrease seems to be sustained.



The multi-faceted approach to the policy has played a part in the success of the strategy. Particularly useful is the fact that it considers the root cause of the problem. The preventative nature is also very important in stopping people coming on to the streets in the first place, as a report by the youth homeless charity "Safe in the City" in 1996 indicated that people were assimilated into 'street culture' in only 16 days and that it took a lot longer for people to get out of this culture and become re-assimilated back into mainstream society.

The Homelessness Act 2002 placed a duty on local authorities in England and Wales to produce a five year strategy to tackle homelessness in their area. This strategy must be produced in partnership with other agencies that can impact on the delivery of the strategy. Part of this strategy must take into account rough sleeping. This has highlighted the issue for local government and ensured that they work with other agencies to tackle homelessness. The policy has also been supported by central government finance (£179 million approximately over 3 years).

It must however be noted that the aforementioned housing legislation does not apply in Scotland. The relevant legislation in Scotland is the Housing Scotland Act 2001.

European Public Social Platform: key messages

Many aspects of the policy work well. It is important that any policy integrates social care with work on housing. Homelessness is not just a housing issue and generally the root cause is not a housing issue. Therefore social care agencies must be fully integrated with and engaged in the work on rough sleepers.

In certain EU member states, in particular in the UK, there is extensive legislation on homelessness and a well developed social care system. However, lessons from those countries could not be transposed to other member states without considerable modification.

Local authorities in the UK, for example, have a statutory homelessness duty and are the main agencies for advice and assistance to homeless people. They however rely to an increasing extent on the voluntary sector and housing associations to assist them in meeting targets, as council housing stock reduces. However, council housing still represents about 10% of the total housing stock



in the UK (approx 2.2 million units are in council control at the moment). These provisions are not present in all member states and consideration of differences must be taken into account when debating a Europe wide rough sleeper's strategy.

Central Government in the UK has given considerable funding to this initiative. Work of this nature costs money and central funding will be important if local and regional government are to implement any Europe wide policy on rough sleeping.