

OPENING OUR EYES TO HOMELESSNESS



Introduction

Homelessness is a serious and growing issue. The statistics are staggering: one in ten people in England say that they have personally experienced homelessness¹ and the number of people sleeping rough in London alone has doubled in the last five years.²

The problem of homelessness is much more pervasive than many of us think. As well as those sleeping on the streets, people are also considered to be homeless if they are living in a situation of violence, in poor or overcrowded conditions, or in a place where they have no rights to stay.³ 15,000 households were accepted as statutorily homeless in the first quarter of 2016 alone – an increase of 9% from the same time the year before.⁴ These households represent just a fraction of the total number of those living in insecure housing or without homes.

The situation for people who are homeless has become increasingly difficult in recent years as public funding for support services has declined. In 2015, 41% of accommodation centres and 36% of day centres had their funding reduced.⁵ Recent changes to the benefit system have also increased people's vulnerability to becoming homeless.⁶

Homelessness, and the risk of becoming homeless, can leave people desperate, vulnerable and without hope. It can affect people's physical and mental health and make it incredibly difficult for them to rebuild their lives once they are able to access accommodation. It is crucial that we all work together to respond to this growing crisis.

This briefing paper provides an overview of the problem of homelessness, summarising the different types of homelessness before looking at its causes and impact. It then shares examples of how some churches are supporting people who are homeless. We hope that this will be a useful resource for other churches seeking to respond to this issue.

What is homelessness?

Homelessness is 'the problem faced by people who lack a place to live that is supportive, affordable, decent and secure'.⁷ Within this definition, there are different categories of homelessness which we explore below. It's worth noting that people often move between these categories as their situation changes.

Statutory homelessness

Local authorities have a duty to house only those people recognised as experiencing 'statutory homelessness'. To fit this category, a person must meet very specific criteria including being unintentionally homeless, eligible for assistance (which will depend on their immigration status) and a member of a priority need group. These priority need groups include, for example, households with dependent children, pregnant women, people who are vulnerable because of mental illness or physical disability and those aged 16 or 17.⁸



A single homeless person is unlikely to be found in priority need under these criteria and so will generally not be provided housing by their local authority. Those who are found to be statutorily homeless will often be placed in temporary accommodation before somewhere is found for them to live.

Around half of people who apply to their local authority for help are not classified as eligible for support. Between January and March 2016, over 29,000 applications were made, but only 15,000 households were found to be eligible. This means that over 14,000 applicants were left to fend for themselves.⁹

Furthermore, the number of homeless applications made represents a very small proportion of those who are actually experiencing homelessness – some people are unaware of the help available while others are unwilling to apply, perhaps due to negative experiences of seeking help in the past. The charity Crisis reports that the majority of women who are homeless have had very negative experiences of approaching a local authority. One woman interviewed about her experience reported that, *'The housing officer went to see the manager and came back and said 'You're not priority'... they said they could tell just on face value, by looking at me. They said if I had to sleep rough, I wouldn't fare any worse than anyone else, so I wasn't vulnerable enough.'*¹⁰

KEY FACT

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Rough sleeping

Sleeping out on the streets is the most visible form of homelessness and the number of people sleeping rough is increasing: in 2015 more than double the number of people were sleeping rough than in 2010.¹¹

In 2015 the government estimated that every night around 3,600 people were sleeping rough in England, but this is very likely to be an underestimate as people who sleep rough often try to sleep in discrete places to keep safe.¹²

Sleeping rough has huge impacts on people's health and well-being. The life expectancy of rough sleepers is 30 years shorter than for the rest of the population.¹³ This is largely due to the strain put on a person's physical and mental health by sleeping rough and the fact that many homeless people also have substance abuse problems.¹⁴ The vulnerable state of those living on the streets is illustrated by Saint Mungo's charity which reports that just over half of UK nationals living on the streets are in need of support for a mental health problem; this figure rises to 60% among women.¹⁵

Vulnerability and social exclusion are compounded by the risk of violence. Those who are sleeping rough are 13 times more likely to have experienced violence and 47 times more likely to be victims of theft than the general public. In one study, Crisis found that almost one in ten rough sleepers had experienced sexual assault within the last year.¹⁶



Single and hidden homelessness

There are many people who are not accepted as being statutorily homeless. These people are the 'hidden homeless' who are left to struggle to survive. Some end up on the street while others end up in 'concealed' accommodation such as squats, bed and breakfasts, hostels or other forms of insecure accommodation.¹⁷

Crisis reports that there are just over 38,500 hostel beds for single homeless people in England, but this is not enough. According to their research, for every month that people spent in formal homelessness provision, they had spent over three months sleeping rough, staying in squats, living with friends or in other hidden situations.¹⁸ Similar to rough sleepers, the hidden homeless are very vulnerable. They are often forced to stay in very poor living conditions and can easily become victims of exploitation or abuse.

What is the impact of homelessness?

The experience of sleeping on the streets and the uncertainty and stress of living in insecure and inappropriate housing has a significant impact on people's lives. The lack of stability creates huge stress and for those on the streets or in hostels, the risk of violence and mental and physical health problems is vastly increased. These effects grow the longer that someone is homeless and so it is crucial that people are able to access support before or soon after they become homeless.

Yet the people who find themselves homeless are not the only ones who suffer the impact of this injustice. Homelessness has negative impacts on whole communities as it increases the number of people sleeping rough, the amount of alcohol and substance abuse on the street and the chance of prostitution.

There is also a broader financial cost as homeless people are more likely to use accident and emergency services, and are more likely to be arrested.¹⁹ These interactions cost the tax-payer approximately £1 billion per year.

Who is most at risk?

There is not a particular type of person who becomes homeless. As David Mackintosh, MP and Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Ending Homelessness, says 'anyone can become homeless given the wrong set of circumstances'.²⁰

More than one in three households in the UK say that they are just getting by or are finding it difficult to manage financially.²¹ A few unfortunate changes in circumstances, such as the loss of a job, an illness or a bereavement, could lead any of these households to lose their home. The end of a private tenancy is the leading cause of homelessness; it is the primary cause in 31% of cases nationally and 41% in London. This shows how families that are doing their best but just getting by are still susceptible.²²

However, certain groups of people are particularly vulnerable.

Women are at increased risk of becoming homeless and are also more at risk when homeless. A third of women say that domestic violence contributed to them becoming homeless, compared to only 8% of men.²³ Once homeless, women are incredibly vulnerable to physical, sexual and verbal abuse and often cannot access the support that they need.²⁴

Shockingly, young people are three times more likely to have experienced homelessness in the last five years than older people. This risk is even higher for young people

who have been in care. The number of young people who are homeless has risen by 40% since 2011/2012²⁵ and is likely to carry on rising as from April 2017, 18 – 21 year olds will no longer be entitled to housing benefit.

Migrants, refugees and asylum seekers are also at increased risk of homelessness. They are often ineligible for formal support such as benefits and services, and they also lack the personal support networks that can protect people from becoming homeless, leaving them isolated and at risk of destitution.²⁶

Serving time in prison and being homeless are closely connected and the experience of one can make people vulnerable to the other. Many people lose their accommodation while in prison; housing benefit stops after 13 weeks in prison and so tenancies are often brought to an end. Consequently, many are released from prison with no accommodation and so end up sleeping on the streets.²⁷ A third of women released from prison in 2015 had no settled home.²⁸ It is no surprise therefore that women are known to reoffend as being in prison is safer than living on the streets.

'Anyone can become homeless given the wrong set of circumstances' David Mackintosh, MP and Chair of the APPG for Ending Homelessness

What are churches doing to respond to the issue of homelessness?

Churches across the country are doing amazing work to support people who are experiencing homelessness, from running winter night shelters to coordinating support networks and offering food through soup-kitchens. In 2014 alone, churches worked with other groups to host over 2,000 homeless guests across 500 winter night shelters. These volunteering hours have been valued at over £3 million.²⁹

This support is often based on a holistic vision of what a home should be. As the 1985 *Faith in the City* report argued:

'A home is more than bricks and mortar, more than a roof over one's head. Decent housing certainly means a place that is dry, warm and in reasonable repair. It also means security, privacy, sufficient space; a place where people can grow, make choices, become more whole people... To believe that you have no control over one of the most basic areas of your life is to feel devalued.'³⁰

Home-lessness is far more than simply house-lessness. Houses are a material need – we need somewhere warm, dry and safe to live – but homes are far more than that. Homes are places of relationship and identity, where people can feel at peace and develop a sense of self-worth.³¹ In their support for homeless people, churches are uniquely able to offer this kind of holistic response that enables people to build a new home, rather than just find new accommodation.

We share two case studies here to show how some churches are helping people find a home.



CASE STUDY

Offering shelter and a warm welcome

Birmingham: The Birmingham Churches Together Night Shelter has been running since 2012 and, throughout the winter period of 2015, 14 churches and over 400 volunteers provided 1,020 bed spaces to rough sleepers.

The shelters provide a lot more than just a bed – they offer a hot meal, a warm welcome and friendship, as well as a comfortable bed and breakfast in the morning.

One volunteer commented that, *'The shelter does more than give people a bed and a hot meal, it recognises each guy as an individual, a human being with intrinsic worth and value. That may be equally, or more important than a bed and a hot meal.'*³²

The support doesn't stop there. Birmingham Churches Together Night Shelter support their guests with their longer-term needs, linking them with other services who might be able to help them. At the end of the 2015 shelter, four of the homeless guests had been helped to find accommodation.

Manchester: Over 20 organisations and churches in Manchester, including Housing Justice, Manchester and Salford City Councils, the Booth Centre and Greater Manchester Together ran a winter night shelter for the first time starting from January 2016.

Seven churches provided shelter and friendship to men who would otherwise have been sleeping on the street. Over a nine-week period, the churches provided 756 beds, taking referrals from the Booth Centre and other organisations.

This night shelter was a pilot and after its clear success, will be running again for six months from the end of October 2016. During this time, the churches will be working closely with Manchester Homeless Partnership to support the development of other forms of emergency accommodation.

CASE STUDY

Supporting people into work

CARIS is a Christian homeless support charity, based in north London. With a Church Urban Fund grant, they were able to establish their 'C4WS' Job Club to support the homeless and unemployed into work. This jobs club complemented their existing work to help homeless people into independent living.

C4WS has been able to help transform lives. Their project lead spoke of an individual who came to them after losing his job: 'Longstanding physical health problems due to his time on the streets had left him poorly and frail, making even traveling between the shelters a hard task. Visa restrictions also meant he was ineligible for any state benefits and his only option for housing was through securing work. [Through C4WS] he successfully gained a placement with Ready to Work, where he spent two weeks working in a busy law firm gaining vital experience and skills. He also had a private session with our Performance Coach to help him work on improving his interview technique.'

'At the end of the season he was able to secure a place in another shelter and at the same time gained a full time job. Things couldn't look more different from when he first arrived at our shelters! Able to save some money, he is now looking to move into a place of his own whilst continuing with work and feeling able to plan for his future for the first time.'

What is Church Urban Fund doing to respond to the issue of homelessness?

Through our Together Network, a network of organisations set up in partnership with dioceses, CUF is working to support homeless people across the country and to improve the help that they receive.

In Birmingham, Nottingham and Manchester this support takes a very practical form as our development workers help to coordinate and run church-based winter night shelters (see case studies for more details). Similar night shelters are currently being established by our partners in Norfolk and Lichfield.

We are also working to build the capacity of those who provide front-line services. In Middlesbrough, Nottingham, Manchester, Kent and Lichfield our partners are active in or lead networks that bring together faith-based and secular groups who are helping homeless people. These networks encourage collaboration, reduce duplication in services and also help to spot gaps in provision resulting in a more joined up system for helping the most vulnerable in society. These networks also have a training and

capacity-building function, helping to increase the skills and confidence of front-line workers.

Together Canterbury are part of Campaign4Change who are working to ensure that people who are released from prison in the Canterbury District have suitable support and accommodation. This will help to protect them from homelessness and so reduce their risk of reoffending.

CUF also supports work with homeless people through our Together Grants programme: between March 2014 and August 2016, over £159,000 was invested in 41 projects that are helping to tackle homelessness in a number of innovative ways. These range from more traditional night shelters to job clubs and projects providing people with training and work experience to help them to find employment and improved mental health support. Through these Together Grants, CUF also supports a wide range of projects that tackle risk factors for homelessness such as unemployment and debt.

Conclusion

The problem of homelessness is growing. It is unacceptable that so many people in our society are left isolated and unsupported, exposed and vulnerable to the dangers of living on the streets or the insecurity of temporary and inappropriate accommodation.

People who find themselves homeless need practical support, but they also need holistic and human care. Churches are uniquely well placed

to offer this kind of support. By offering a warm welcome to those most marginalised in our society, churches not only respond to people's material needs but also help to restore dignity and offer hope. As the number of people who are homeless or in insecure housing grows, it is all the more important that churches and individuals continue to offer this life-changing support.

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Did you know?

Church Urban Fund will provide more than 4000 beds for people experiencing homelessness this year through church run winter night shelters. You can get involved and support this work by taking the Advent Sleepout Challenge.

www.sleepoutchallenge.org.uk

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