

GENERAL SYNOD

Homeless Task Force

(Note on terminology: "Rough Sleepers" refers to those who live on the streets. The "homeless" has a wider definition, including people without permanent or secure accommodation, such as those living in hostels or bedsits. The term may also be used to denote "Rough Sleepers")

Introduction

Homelessness in England has risen sharply since the financial crisis of 2008.

Many churches already provide emergency shelter to rough sleepers, particularly during the winter months. The Church of England has a track record in providing for the homeless.

As Christians, we are called to serve the poorest in our society not only with prayer but with practical action. *"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says"* (James 1:22)

The aim of this PMM is to establish a task force to scale up and co-ordinate the Church's own efforts in tandem with those of major homeless agencies to provide better support for the homeless on both a short and long-term basis.

The state of homelessness in Britain

1. How many people sleep rough on the streets of England?

Rough sleeping is at record levels. Figures obtained from the *Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government* by *BBC News* (January 2018) present a distressing picture.

- Annual rough sleeping count shows highest ever recorded level of 4,751;
- The numbers have risen by 15% compared with last year, up 169% since 2010;
- More than three quarters are outside London;
- Towns and urban areas which have seen big increases include Brighton, Medway, Southend, Oxford, Tameside, Worthing, Salford and Eastbourne;
- 14% of rough sleepers are women;
- More than 90% are over the age of 25;
- One in five is originally from outside the UK;
- People sleeping on the streets are seventeen times more likely to be victims of violence than members of the public (*Crisis*.)

Although these are the official figure taken from street counts, they will not include the unknown number of people who sleep on night buses and 24/7 Underground trains. Data quality across the UK is sporadic. For example, in London the supply of information on rough sleepers is better than that of regional cities. Some charities estimate that the number of rough sleepers on a given night could be as high as 9,000.

2. How many people are homeless?

The homeless charity *Shelter* released a report in November 2017 using data from HM Government which was subsequently published in *The Guardian*.

- More than 300,000 people in Britain are officially recorded as homeless OR living in inadequate accommodation (such as bed and breakfast rooms or hostels);
- This is an increase of 13,000 since 2016;
- Regional cities have seen substantial annual growth in the rate of homelessness. In Manchester, one in 154 people is homeless (compared with one in 266 in 2016). In Bristol one in 170 is affected;
- These figures include rough sleepers;
- The figures **do not** include the “hidden homeless” - those people who have nowhere to live but who are not recorded as needing housing assistance. The charity *Centrepoin*t released a report in April 2018 which estimates that 86,000 young people in the UK approached their local authority for help as they were homeless/at risk of being homeless. **58% are not recorded as receiving any positive action leading to their homelessness being prevented or dealt with.**

The role of Government

3. Provision for the homeless varies significantly across the devolved nations of the United Kingdom. In England, local authorities have a duty to house a person only if they are assessed and accepted as statutorily homeless.
4. The Homeless Reduction Bill received Royal Assent (and therefore became an Act of Parliament) on 27th April 2018. The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 will place new legal duties on English councils so that anyone who is homeless or at risk of homelessness will have access to meaningful help irrespective of their priority need status (as long as they are eligible for assistance.) For example, in the past single men and women would be considered to have a lower priority need status than a single mother, a disabled person or a family. The unintended consequence of this was the penalisation of young single people.
5. Part VII of the Housing Act 1996, as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002, sets out the duties owed by English local housing authorities (LAs) to someone who is homeless or threatened with homelessness. Section 175 of the 1996 Act defines that a person is threatened with homelessness if it is likely that they will become homeless within 28 days. The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 extends the number of days from 28 to 56. In addition, people who have received a valid notice under section 21 of the Housing Act 1988 and the expiry date is within 56 days, will be treated as being threatened with homelessness.
6. On 30th March 2018 the Rt. Hon Sajid Javid MP announced a £30M fund for local authorities with high levels of rough sleeping. HM Government intends to halve rough sleeping by 2022 and eliminate it by 2027. Devolved authorities (e.g. Manchester) are also pioneering their own initiatives for the homeless.
7. “No Second Night Out” schemes operate across England, whereby outreach teams assertively find and then encourage the homeless into places of temporary accommodation. This varies in effectiveness and practice across the country.

The role of charities and homeless agencies

8. Major charities and agencies work to fill the gaps in Government provision and assist those who are homeless. They provide advice and support to those in need, while lobbying and working with Government. For example, the Homeless Reduction Act involved consultation with *Crisis*. The Greater London Authority has a database on the homeless run by *St. Mungo's*. Charities consulted for this paper include *Centrepoint*, *Housing Justice*, *Crisis*, *Shelter*, *The Church Army* and *St. Mungo's*. Most homeless charities belong to *Homeless Link*, an umbrella representative body which has also been consulted.

These charities have deep expertise and experience in this field. They all have different ideas on how the Church may help work with them and with local authorities.

The role of the Church to date

9. For centuries the Church was the main provider of relief for the poor in England. In the 20th and 21st Centuries, the Church has traditionally provided support for the homeless on a parish or Diocesan basis. St. Martin-in-the-Fields (London) has a long track record of working with rough sleepers. In Norwich, *St Martin's Housing Trust* began as a homeless shelter in a disused church. The charity *Shelter* was the result of concerted action by Christian and Jewish communities in the 1960s. Today, provision for the homeless depends on the actions of individual parishes or Dioceses. There are many examples of good practice, for which space does not permit.
10. Many representatives of homeless charities have expressed interest in working with the Church. As an institution, the Church of England is both a major landholder and a politically neutral organisation, able to work across the divisions of party politics in Government.
11. As Christians, we are called to establish and represent the Kingdom of God on earth. We have not only a duty but a calling to put into action Christ's words "*Love your neighbour as yourself*" (*Mark 12:31*)
12. We welcome those measures introduced by HM Government, but we must be prepared to provide additional support for those who will inevitably fall by the wayside. Even prior to the financial crisis of 2008 (and its subsequent effects on public finances) successive Governments have not been able to provide a full and comprehensive solution to homelessness.

Shaping a national strategy – what can be done?

13. The Church could make a huge difference in the lives of these people by acting as a facilitator for a concerted initiative. It would bring together representatives both of the major homeless charities and local and central Government in order to establish and co-ordinate a national strategy. This would identify and fill gaps in provision for rough sleepers and long term homeless individuals and families, using the wealth of existing expertise to discern best practice and implement it where needed.

14. God has bestowed resources upon the Church. As one of the biggest landholders in England, we should examine whether we are in a position to provide dynamic assistance.
15. For example, the provision of 7,000 supported housing units in partnership with a service provider (homeless charity) and a financial supporter (a socially responsible capital provider) would *“be a game changer”*, to quote one homeless agency’s Chief Executive. The overwhelming evidence points to a housing-led policy being the most successful way of ending rough sleeping by providing the homeless with:
- (i) a place of their own and
 - (ii) support services centred around their new home.
16. This “Housing First” policy has been implemented in Finland resulting in a 50% reduction in homelessness. Flats are provided without precondition, and support is provided for mental health issues, substance abuse etc.

Last words – the reality of homelessness in Britain:

- *‘Some [local authorities] don’t even have a housing unit, some are in a library and some you can’t even speak to someone in person...there is a lot of confusion... every single place is different.’ (Centrepoint Helpline Staff)*
- *“This winter has tragically claimed the lives of a number of people sleeping on the streets. This is completely unacceptable in modern Britain.” (Communities Secretary Sajid Javid, March 2018)*
- *“Every time I wake up, it's a bonus.” (Tony, a 72-year-old former railway worker now living in a concrete underpass in Milton Keynes, quoted by BBC News 25th January 2018)*

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