



A Home For All? - homelessness policy challenges for Labour's Third Term

Executive Summary

A Home for All? - homelessness policy challenges for Labour's Third Term is a new report published by The Salvation Army, one of the largest providers of social care for homeless people.

It offers seven clear policy challenges to the Government for its third term in office, highlighting the frustration of hostel residents and key workers. It shows that many people are ready to move into their own accommodation but end up waiting months on end for appropriate housing to be found, effectively 'bed-blocking' spaces in hostels for vulnerable homeless people still on the streets.

The seven policy challenges to Government in *A Home for All?* include:

1. Move-on accommodation –

Challenge: To find imaginative ways to ensure people who are currently homeless have access to affordable housing.

In a recent survey of Salvation Army hostels, it was found that 47% of residents were ready to move into independent accommodation if it was available. This shocking figure shows that right across the UK there remains a serious problem of people becoming stuck in hostels because of a desperate shortage of affordable housing.

This is extremely costly for Government and voluntary organisations, reduces the number of free bed spaces and demoralises residents.

It is important, however, to ensure that homeless people are not resettled in hard-to-let ghettos where poor quality housing and intimidation can reduce their chances of succeeding in their tenancy. More use should be made of private sector rented accommodation and more effort is required to address the barriers that deter landlords from taking welfare beneficiaries, such as the general stigma associated with homelessness.

2. Criminalisation

Challenge: To review the impact of recent legislation on the ability of homeless people to receive the help they need.

There has been a dramatic increase in the use of punitive measures, such as ASBOs, to deal with 'problem street culture' and civil injunctions to deal with issues such as begging. By focussing on enforcement rather than prevention, local authorities and the police are failing to address the root causes of the problem.

A recent study of 200 people who beg in Britain showed that 45 per cent had an addiction problem and 55 per cent had mental or physical health problems.

Cont...//

Many service providers are concerned that injunctions and ASBO's merely serve to displace activities such as begging and street drinking. Equally fining disadvantaged people for activities such as begging is absurd - usually forcing them to beg more or turn to crime to pay their penalties.

Recent legislation which criminalises street homelessness has echoes of the Vagrancy Acts and Poor Laws of the 1600s which punished people for being poor. It is, as such, counterproductive and morally questionable.

3. Substance misuse

Challenge: To ensure that all services targeted at the homeless population include accurate assessment of substance use problems and the option of a fast track into substance use services.

The greatest failure in recent Government responses on substance use relates to the present alcohol policy, which has recently been announced after years of consideration. The focus of the policy is narrow, highlighting the problem of binge drinking. It does little to address the underlying health problems caused by alcohol, even though they have a much greater impact on the economy and on personal suffering than those caused by some other drugs which receive a higher political priority. Alcohol and other drug issues need to be confronted together, as they compound the complex needs of the socially excluded.

4. Rough Sleeping

Challenge: To provide a targeted, co-ordinated and integrated response for people with complex needs, offering a high level of support within specialist accommodation.

Although The Salvation Army acknowledges and welcomes the fall in the number of rough sleepers, those remaining on the streets often have multiple and complex needs requiring a high level of support with housing not the primary issue.

Some individuals are perceived to have made a choice to sleep rough. However, mental health and substance misuse assessments should be made before judging a person's capacity to make an informed decision. Appropriate specialist assessment is needed to assess and monitor someone's situation while they are sleeping rough.

Future government strategy should address contradictory policies and practices which cause homelessness and rough sleeping. e.g. a tenant's right to buy their own council property has reduced the supply of affordable accommodation.

5. Asylum Seekers

Challenge: To extend homeless provision to ALL those in need.

People who are homeless are homeless regardless of their nationality, ethnicity, race or immigration status – a point which Government has failed to understand. The only certainty emerging from often confused Government thinking is that policy makers are intent on seeing the issues purely in legal and economic terms. They are ignoring the social dynamics which create migrant patterns. Funding at all levels, from social security benefits to housing benefit and Supporting People payments, has been denied to large sections of asylum seekers, migrants and service providers alike. The challenge for Government is to act with compassion and integrity towards these groups offering them food, shelter and care as a minimum entitlement.

6. Postcode Lottery

Challenge: To provide good quality homelessness services right across the country.

Funding has not been consistent due to the way it is assessed through the Homelessness Action Plan (HAP). This has created winners and losers as the system favoured some areas over others.

Rural areas miss out due to rough sleepers being dispersed over wide areas, and some service users have had to overcome the difficulties of their localities not wanting to admit to a homelessness problem, e.g tourist areas. Homeless people are more likely to resort to crime where basic provision such as soup runs or drop-n centres do not exist. Others are forced to travel to other towns to get help if they have no 'local connection' with the city they find themselves homeless in.

Access to health services is particularly difficult and a postcode lottery. Provision is not strategic and normally relies on sympathetic GPs and district nurses.

7. Breaking the hostel model

Challenge: To review the Supporting People eligibility criteria.

The Salvation Army is a supporter of the Government's Supporting People initiative, but the way the funding has been cut has caused controversy, as has what it will or will not fund. Hostels must provide more than food and shelter to be effective, otherwise they are little more than institutionalised 'warehousing' of the homeless.

Hostels need to be more integrated into the community and more focused on getting people back into the labour market, incorporating things such as cafes and retail outlets that would offer training and employment as part of a 'Hostel Plus' scheme.

Salvation Army survey and background information

A recent survey* of The Salvation Army's 50 residential centres found that:

- 47% of clients in Salvation Army hostels are ready to move out into their own accommodation, but cannot due to a chronic lack of social housing.
- 46% of Salvation Army hostel clients have an addiction problem.
- 69% of clients had slept rough, with nearly a quarter of these doing so for more than 6 months.

*Survey conducted in July 2005 with 1047 clients.

The Salvation Army runs 50 residential centres around the UK offering accommodation to 3,000 people which includes help with addictions, life-skills training and various vocational and IT training courses. Dozens of local church and community centres provide hot meals, clean clothes, washing facilities and advice to homeless people and assist with meals runs for rough sleepers. The Salvation Army also runs six detox centres offering specialist treatment.

A Home for All? is available for download at salvationarmy.org.uk/ahomeforall or hard copies can be obtained by calling 020 7367 4700 or emailing communications@salvationarmy.org.uk