

Porchlight : 35 years of changing lives (1974 – 2009)
Homeless and nowhere to go... an overview of 35 years of homelessness

Over a 35 year period, times have certainly changed. However, it seems that the problems the sector deals with have not. They are definitely more complex and the bureaucracy associated with setting up and managing services has changed beyond recognition. But as a society we still treat our vulnerable fellow human beings as second class citizens, without statutory protection charities like Porchlight are for many, the only safety net.

Homelessness in Britain has for centuries been influenced by the Poor Law of 1530. Then in 1948 following the end of the Second World War the government brought in the National Assistance Act which placed a duty with the Welfare Departments (social services). Despite this provision being made homelessness escalated throughout the 1960s and came to a head following the 1966 TV drama “Cathy Come Home”. Adding to the situation were the 1960s slum clearances which led to housing shortages, whilst at the same time decreasing the number of houses within the private rented sector. At this time, many people were homeless due to circumstances outside of their control, and this meant there was much sympathy for homeless people. This led to increasing public pressure and awareness and effectively forced central government to react. During this period many charities were established to help those who were homeless: 1963 - The Simon Community; 1966 – Shelter; 1967 – Crisis; 1969 - St Mungo’s; 1969 – Centrepoin; 1974 – Porchlight (first established as Canterbury Cyrenians). In 1974, Porchlight opened its first hostel in Canterbury in a building donated by the Mayor of Canterbury.

The mounting political pressure throughout the 1970s led to the 1977 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act and this legislation is a major landmark in the policy environment relating to homelessness. Local authorities already had a “duty of care”, however this was mainly directed towards homeless families, especially mothers with children, which meant many families were separated.

However, there is no readily available, comprehensive and robust source of information of the number of homeless people during this time. The available figures on the number of statutory homeless households, rough sleepers, and hostel and night shelter users are all estimates and are subject to limitations. Nevertheless, from a policy and practice perspective it is important to produce reliable estimates of the number of homeless people and to examine the factors that influence the scale of the problem.

The first national survey of people sleeping rough was undertaken in 1965 by the National Assistance Board and 965 people were counted sleeping rough in Britain. It is only since the

1990s that rough sleeper counts have become commonplace and regularly undertaken. A count of the numbers rough sleeping was included in the 1991 Census, which counted 2,703 people sleeping rough the night of the census. The limited data and evidence available suggests the scale of homelessness increased significantly during the 1980s and early 1990s with a slight decline in the later 1990s. The National Rough Sleeping Estimate for 2008 shows 483 people sleeping rough on the streets of England on any single night (based on the sum of counts undertaken in areas with a known or suspected rough sleeping problem). This represents a 74% reduction in rough sleeping since the 1998 baseline.

Many charities were set up throughout the 1970s to meet the needs of those finding themselves homeless. Both the demand and supply within the British housing market has restructured over the past decades in ways that generally operate to the disadvantage of single people on low incomes. Homelessness during this period was mainly associated with older single, men and poor families. However, in the 1980s this began to change with a significant number of young people, women and people from ethnic minority communities experiencing homelessness.

In the mid 1970s, homelessness and empty houses were a local and national scandal¹. Alongside the charities establishing themselves to meet this need other schemes were developed by government. One of these was a project that worked with nine housing associations to make use of houses that were empty and awaiting demolition or 'short life' property. 'Short-life' meant housing with less than ten years of life left. Housing Association Grants were provided to cover the cost of emergency repairs necessary to make the houses safe, weatherproof and hygienic and let them to people needing short-term temporary or emergency accommodation. This scheme benefited people in need of accommodation and kept families from expensive bed and breakfast provision. It was also good for local communities, as houses did not remain empty to become vandalised and a danger to local children.

In 1979, Margaret Thatcher became Britain's first woman Prime Minister. The economic, social and housing policies pursued by the Conservatives from 1979-1997 exacerbated the homelessness situation in the country. The 1977 Housing Act clarified and strengthened local authorities' duty of care and transferred this to housing departments. This and the later 1985 Housing Act consolidated legislation that distinguished those "intentionally" or "unintentionally" homeless. "Priority need" categories were also introduced alongside the level of service the local authority was expected to provide. This has created figures relating to statutory homeless that mainly relate to homeless families, or those recognised as priority need. Due to the introduction of priority need the division between homeless families and single homeless was reinforced in policy and practice, and this division remains today.

¹http://www2.walsall.gov.uk/History_Projects/Caldmore/Caldmore_Area_Housing_Association/Homelessness.asp

This growth of homelessness can be associated to a number of factors, the shortage of affordable rented housing, unemployment, and cuts in benefits. Meanwhile there was an increase in demand for housing. This trend is attributable to rising divorce rates and an ageing population, as well as a growing tendency for unmarried people to live alone.

Homelessness is also strongly associated with rising levels of poverty and Britain has seen a rapid growth in the unequal distribution of wealth throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The proportion of the population living on less than half of the average income (the most widely accepted measure of relative poverty) rose from 6% in 1987 (roughly four million people) to 18% in 1995 (over 13 million)². The increase in poverty throughout this time is largely attributable to changes in the labour market.

The decline of the large-scale manufacturing industry hit some groups particularly hard, especially older male manual workers who consequently moved out of the labour market and onto Incapacity Benefit in unprecedented numbers³. These changes also disproportionately affected poorly qualified young men by cutting off their traditional route into work through apprenticeship schemes or unskilled labour. Youth unemployment has also grown dramatically since the 1970s, and, despite a general fall in unemployment from the mid-1990s, very high rates of joblessness persist among young men in some deprived areas⁴. Youth unemployment remains a major problem especially in context of today's recession.

There has also been a significant reduction in the social security protection given to unemployed people, particularly young people, over the past two decades. Most 16 and 17 year olds lost their entitlement to Income Support in 1988, and young people aged 18 to 24 began to receive lower rates of Income Support and Jobseekers' Allowance than those aged 25 or over. It is beyond doubt that these changes were key to the rapid increase in youth homelessness in the late 1980s⁵. Around the same time, the 1989 Children's Act placed a duty of care on local authorities of young people in need aged under 18 years.

In the 1970s homelessness was associated with low-paid work; now very few homeless people are in employment. The risk factors now common to the overwhelming majority of homeless people is poverty and unemployment. In the 1980s, policy makers and practitioners recognised that specific groups were more vulnerable to homelessness than others, namely those with mental health or substance misuse, and those leaving institutions such as children's homes or prison. Theories relating to this were further developed in the 1990s identifying a range of risk factors associated with homelessness. These included: sexual or physical abuse in childhood or adolescence; family disputes and breakdown; a background in local authority care; offending behaviour and/or experience of prison; previous service in the armed forces; lack of a social support network; debts, especially rent or

² Turok et al, 1998

³ Turok and Edge, 1999

⁴ Roberts, 1997

⁵ Oldman, 1997

mortgage arrears; causing nuisance to neighbours; drug or alcohol misuse; school exclusion and lack of qualifications; mental health problems; poor physical health.

As mentioned, family breakdown creates a serious risk of homelessness for those who are poor or in other ways vulnerable. There is a particularly strong relationship between conflict-ridden step-relationships and homelessness among young people⁶. Thus, relationship breakdown (either with parents or partner) has remained a key 'immediate cause' of homelessness for several decades⁷. Relationship breakdown is closely associated with homelessness not only among lone-parent families, but also among single people, where social isolation often constitutes a key factor in their vulnerability⁸.

Kent is a large, mainly rural county and homelessness is often hidden. Homelessness in rural areas is driven largely by a shortage of affordable housing, with house prices often pushed up by the growing demand from affluent in-migrants and buyers of second homes⁹. Loss of tied accommodation is also a particularly important 'trigger' for homelessness in rural areas. The disproportionate impact of the Right to Buy policy in rural areas has depleted the already inadequate stocks of social rented housing in these areas, leaving single people with virtually no chance of gaining access to this accommodation. What little private rented accommodation there is in rural communities tends to be expensive¹⁰. Research in the 1980s and 1990s showed a lack of specialist services in most rural areas, with homelessness often remaining 'hidden', with people forced to share with relatives, live in damp and dilapidated caravans, or stay in out-of season property lets¹¹. Also, the shortage of housing and job opportunities, as well as homelessness services, forces many people, particularly young single people, to migrate to towns and cities, causing their homelessness to be registered as urban rather than rural¹².

The late 1980s saw a visible increase in the numbers of people rough sleeping. This led to another wave of charities emerging to meet a local need: 1980 - Reading Single Homeless Project; 1982 - Brighton Housing Trust; 1989 - The Depaul Trust; 1989 - St Giles Trust. Due to the charities now working to support those who were homeless, statistics start emerging, especially for London. By the 1980s around 20,000 people were living in accommodation for homeless single people in London (now provided by charities and housing associations rather than Government). Meanwhile, numbers sleeping on the streets had rose to more than 1,000¹³.

Reasons for this increase include the new legislation stopping 16 and 17 year-olds from claiming housing benefits. In addition, many of the old, crowded impersonal dormitories for

⁶ Jones, 1993

⁷ Greve, 1991

⁸ Daly, 1993

⁹ Diaz and Colman, 1997

¹⁰ Lockwood, 1996

¹¹ Simmons, 1993

¹² Lockwood, 1996; Centrepoint Eden Valley, 1998

¹³ St Mungo's www.mungos.org

homeless people were closed and replaced with hostels with single rooms. While this meant that housing standards rose, the number of available beds fell. And a general increase in the number of people with drink, drug and mental health problems exacerbated the problem.

The increase also prompted the government to develop a number of initiatives to address this issue. The Rough Sleepers Initiative was launched in London in 1990. In 1996, this initiative was expanded to other cities. This coincided with the 1996 Housing Act which again changed local authorities' duty of care. Following this action by government, the numbers on the streets in London fell from over 1,000 to around 600¹⁴. In 1999 the government's Rough Sleeper Unit took over the co-ordination of all action and initiatives set up to address rough sleeping. Through the Rough Sleepers Initiative it has been recognised that multi-agency working is the key to addressing the issue of homelessness and it is not simply a matter of just housing, but health and employment are also factors.

The idea of the hidden homeless emerged in the 1990s and started an ongoing debate on what constitutes those who are hidden and how we monitor and collect data on this group. Additional research in the 1990s highlighted that little was known of homeless people's own perceptions and definitions of homelessness. Also, research highlighted how people move through a process of homelessness and it is not a static experience or situation.

Further research in the 1990s found that the overwhelming majority of homeless people in seaside towns were local. Those without local connections (often searching for seasonal employment) were particularly vulnerable on account of their lack of local support networks, and were more likely to end up in hostels or sleeping on the streets. Whilst, the high levels of disadvantaged groups in seaside towns such as the mentally ill and elderly, appears to have led to levels of deprivation comparable to those found in inner-city areas¹⁵.

In 1997, Labour wins the national election and Tony Blair becomes Prime Minister. The Labour government pushed homelessness up the political agenda, prioritising rough sleepers through policy measures of the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU). However this led to the narrowing of the definition of homelessness to its most simplistic form. This brings in a new funding and policy era for homelessness services, with increasing requirements for services to provide evidence of the benefits of services and the outcomes they are achieving. The DETR launched a "Youth Homelessness Action Programme" (YHAP) to bring together central government, local government and the voluntary sector, to create local and national frameworks to tackle youth homelessness. In 2002 the strengthening of homelessness legislation and the extension of the priority need groups are in part responsible for the sharp increase in homelessness acceptances between 2002 and 2003. Since 2003 local authorities have had strategies in place to prevent and tackle homelessness. Local authority homelessness acceptances peaked in 2003/4, and since then have fallen by over 60%, with year on year reductions.

¹⁴ St Mungo's www.mungos.org

¹⁵ Kennedy, 1993

In 2003, the Supporting People Programme was introduced nationally, with the aim to improve the quality of life for vulnerable people by enabling them to live more independent lives in their communities, or maintaining their capacity to do so. In Kent the programme aimed to work in partnership to provide high-quality, cost-effective and flexible housing-related support services for the vulnerable people of Kent; which promote independent living, facilitate social inclusion and keep them safe and secure. It was envisaged that housing-related support services will complement other service provision across the county. This strategy is currently under review as the future of Supporting People is under question. The decision has been made to un-ringfence Supporting People funding, however there will be a Parliamentary inquiry into the Supporting People programme, which will hopefully bring more stability to the sector.

The 2004 Housing Act introduces legislation around houses in multiple occupation, increases the protection provided to gypsies and travellers, launches the Empty Homes Policy and creates Tenancy Deposit Schemes. Now, the sector is regulated and is driven by a combination of professional pride and strategic thinking, willed to help people find themselves, friends and where possible be reunited with their families.

“We’ve made great progress in preventing and tackling homelessness with numbers falling to a 23 year low. This record reduction shows the success of prevention schemes funded by £300m worth of government investment. Rough sleeping has also dropped by more than two thirds since 1998.” Yvette Cooper, Housing Minister (September 2006).

In 2007 Ed Mitchell (ex-ITN reporter) was sleeping rough in Brighton after alcoholism and debt caused the collapse of his marriage and he was declared bankrupt. “There is a tsunami of bad debt about to hit this economy,” Ed Mitchell predicts in an interview with Robert Booth, for The Guardian (15 December 2007).

At present, the number of households accepted by local housing authorities as owed the main homelessness duty in England between January and March 2009 was 26% lower than for the same period in 2008¹⁶. Consequently, the number of households living in temporary accommodation has been falling since the end of 2005. On 31 March 2009 the number had fallen by 17% compared to 31 March 2008 and is over a third lower than 2004. 54% of local authorities in England have already met the target to halve the number of households in temporary accommodation compared to the baseline at the end of 2004.

The government published its No-one Left Out¹⁷ strategy in 2008, which aims to end rough sleeping by 2012. In 2009, Homeless Link published a report into the services available for people rough sleeping. They questioned 228 local authorities that do not provide direct access accommodation. 84% of respondents were able to sign post, refer or nominate people to direct access hostels in bordering areas. 80% did not feel that they do enough for

¹⁶ <http://www.communities.gov.uk/housing/homelessness/homelessnesstrends/>

¹⁷ <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/housing/roughsleepingstrategy>

the most vulnerable people. This leaves us with a question of what will happen in these areas at a time when inevitable funding cuts loom.

How the sector will change over another 35 years is anybody's guess. We can only learn from past experiences and the sector has changed dramatically over the past 10 years. Hostels are places where people can be stabilised, link into treatment services, develop support structures, become fully independent and included in their community. Meanwhile, the effects of the recession are starting to bite, in as much as funding has slowed and the demand for our services is rising. However, Porchlight will continue to provide support services to others who find themselves homeless and as one of the government's Rough Sleeper Champions, we will continue to work with government to help them reach their targets to end rough sleeping by 2012.