



Changing Lives for Good?

Help the Aged Homeless Campaign Conference

April 1999

CHANGING LIVES FOR GOOD?

HELP THE AGED HOMELESS CAMPAIGN CONFERENCE, APRIL 1999

The Changing Lives for Good? conference in London on 26 April 1999 was organised by Help the Aged and chaired by broadcaster and journalist Richard Linley. It was made possible by a grant from The Diana Princess of Wales Memorial Fund.

Daniel Pearson, Special Projects Manager for Help the Aged, reviewed the work of the Homeless Campaign during 1998-9 and said the conference marked the end of the first stage. The campaign would now be stepped up in terms of research, service development, action research, support to the projects and fundraising. He said policy objectives would be refined to develop an effective campaign to change policy and practice.

“But we need your support. The agenda which emerges from this conference will shape the next stage of the campaign.” He said.

Testing public attitudes

Help the Aged commissioned NOP to undertake a survey of 1,000 people in Great Britain to test public attitudes to older homeless people.

The poll found that 23 per cent thought older people had brought homelessness upon themselves; 68 per cent did not think they had. Most people thought about one in five rough sleepers were aged over 50; the real figure is about one in three.

The majority of those taking part in the survey thought money and alcohol were the main reasons for homelessness, with mental health and relationship problems less important.

Daniel Pearson said: “It’s heartening that most people understand the needs of older people, but very worrying that a sizeable minority think older people have deliberately made themselves homeless when this is clearly not the case. Help the Aged has never found an older person – someone over the age of 50 – who has willingly made themselves homeless.”

Action for older homeless people

Jane Minter of the Housing Associations Charitable Trust (HACT) described the partnership between Help the Aged, HACT and Crisis which has developed as part of Help the Aged Homeless Campaign. “The three of us have different complementary skills. HACT is a grant giver with good links with housing associations; Crisis has an in-depth knowledge of the issues of homelessness, the development of services and the knowledge of agencies working with homelessness and Help the Aged is a major charity working very broadly across the needs of older people.

The results of our coming together is a programme of funding for a range of local projects across the UK, meeting the needs of older people.”

Jane said another important element of the three-year programme was an independent evaluation. “Its purpose is to disseminate the lessons we will learn, to feed into new project development and begin to look at what the issues are in terms of national policy development.”

Both Help the Aged and HACT have committed £100,000 a year over the next three years for local project development and Help the Aged and Crisis will fund an independent evaluation.

The aim is to fund up to 20 local projects across the UK, within defined objectives:

- to support the development of new approaches in existing services to meet the needs of older people

- to encourage the development of new services where none exist at present – with particular concerns about the needs of women, of those from ethnic minority communities and refugees
- to identify example of good practice in relation to user involvement
- to promote projects which are about preventative policies

Up to £30,000 a year will be available for each project, with funding tapering over the three year period. “The programme is focused on real initiatives for those over 50. We’ve had 130 enquiries so far and more are coming in. We have a rolling programme of project approval so we are still looking to receive applications.”

She described the first project to be approved by Bondway Housing Association, where a specialist outreach worker had been funded to work with older homeless people, with the aim of providing resettlement.

The Threshold Centre in South London which provides an advice service mainly for people from the black and ethnic minority communities, had also received grant approval. Threshold will be working with volunteers to provide support to prevent people losing their homes.

A third project, St.Giles in South London, will work with people who are living in insecure housing, building links with local organisations working with older people.

“We’ve recently shortlisted more projects in Wales, Scotland, the South, in the North and the Midlands, offering a range of services from outreach and advocacy to needs identification and skills sharing. We want to fund work across the UK and outside London, supporting a mix of projects in different parts of the country. The key factors are user involvement, quality, developing local partnerships and developing clear outcomes. The programme will run until 2001 with a final evaluation as well as progress reports.

“With the current Government focus on homelessness it is a critical time to be running this programme. Our aim is to ensure that the needs of older people are not marginalized in policy making.”

Addressing the needs of older people

Kate Tomlinson, Research and Development Manager for Crisis, said it had become involved as a result of a research initiative undertaken jointly with Help the Aged.

“That research did an excellent job in laying out the reasons for tenancy breakdowns and it highlighted the general invisibility of older homeless people and in particular, of homeless older women. The urgent task now is to find solutions and identify what works.

“There are some very specific questions that this evaluation can address, such as how we can assess the quality of the service for users. I would say, ask the customer. Surprisingly, this approach is rarely taken although it is beginning to happen now. It doesn’t sound very revolutionary but if it is done well it can have a revolutionary effect.”

Kate described the success of measures in New York where safe, supportive hostel environments had been provided which people wanted to use. “I hope this evaluation will allow us to look at those sort of questions – to say what kind of services would you use?

“Another element relates to partnerships and how you make them work effectively. Ending street homelessness doesn’t just happen on the streets. Partnerships will be the key. These include partnerships between housing associations and homelessness agencies so we are able to offer a permanent solution, not just a temporary place to stay. There will be partnerships with other non-homelessness specialists, for example organisations working with older people, like Help the Aged, and partnerships at a local level.

To work effectively, people must get together at a local level and make those links.”

“Health services will be very much involved as well. Some of the policy issues we might want to look into include the introduction of primary care groups and I hope the evaluation report will give some solid example of partnership in practice.

If we can find solutions which work for older homeless, with their complex needs, their health problems and very often dependency problems, I believe we come much closer to finding solutions that work for others as well.”

The issues

In the ensuing discussion, delegates highlighted the issue of defining homelessness. “It will be an important part of the evaluation because at the moment, the reason why older homeless people fall down a gap is that everyone thinks it is someone else’s problem,” said one delegate.

Questions about how to promote strong leadership in partnerships and the problems of hidden homelessness were raised. The difficulty for frail older people in accessing care and benefits, tenancy breakdowns, the need for resettlement support and the cost effectiveness of schemes such as the Alcohol Recovery Project were also highlighted.

One crucial issue was that of outcomes and what would be considered a success when working with older homeless people.

Future plans in the voluntary sector

Jon Fitzmaurice, Director of the National Homeless Alliance (NHA), said youth homelessness had a far higher profile so this initiative was important to redress the balance. Describing the NHA as a nationwide alliance of homelessness providers and agencies, he said it involved 1,000 members in England and Wales covering a range from day centres to hostels to resettlement projects.

“We have an agenda for action here and what we at NHA need to do is look at the ways in which we can engage more actively with the issues around older homeless people and work with Help the Aged and partners on a number of projects.”

“One forgets that there are so many different projects around the country that are tackling homelessness – some of them fairly isolated. One scheme we are involved in is to try to link everyone up on the Internet where people can share experiences. The skill and energy is out there – it is just a question of mobilising it. We also want to be a catalyst with this partnership, engaging our work and our members in it.”

Ray Oakley, Director of Research and Development at the Salvation Army, said his organisation tried to involve homeless people themselves in resolving problems.

Describing research that The Salvation Army had undertaken he said: “You must know the climate and have authentic data before decisions are taken.”

He said The Salvation Army provided 25 residential care homes offering 840 places, 48 hostels for single homeless people with 3,000 places and, through its housing association SAHA, 180 sheltered housing units with extra care. There were 800 Salvation Army Community Centres.

“In our planning we take into account the same philosophy that has gone into our research, that not everyone wants the same thing. That includes homeless people. They want options. They don’t all want to live in a flat or a house.”

“Our objective is to develop services and facilities for homeless and elderly people which allow them to make choices from a range of relevant options in order to enhance their quality of life and independence.”

Colin Smith, Assistant Director of the Catholic Housing Aid Society (CHAS), described its work as providing housing advice, both from its office in Westminster and through eight independent CHAS groups throughout England.

“As a charity we also work with Christian churches and church groups, raising awareness, campaigning and undertaking political and policy work.

“Our slogan is preventing homelessness and our vision is that people have a home which is safe, warm and secure in which they can afford to live. We meet this vision by direct action, through housing advice services and by raising awareness through churches.

“We believe that street homelessness and rough sleepers are the visible tip of a very large iceberg and that there are many thousands of people who face homelessness every week through a wide variety of reasons.

“Those older people who come to CHAS require specific types of support. A typical case would be that of an elderly homeowner, continuing to pay for their home in reduced circumstances, unaware that financial support was available. Older people will sometimes be unfamiliar with how to get things done. They are not comfortable with State support. They tend to be a more invisible group and they may not be out and around as much as younger people.

“At CHAS it is possible for us to find places for people over the age of 60 with some housing associations, if they are prepared to accept studio accommodation. But this is often unacceptable to them as they have been living in larger properties and have accumulated a lifetime’s belongings. They will often choose to stay living in very poor conditions than give these things up. They also like to be close to areas with which they are familiar. Being fiercely independent, they may not want to move into any accommodation they perceive as a care situation.

“Elders from ethnic minority communities may not speak English and will thus be unaware that there is help available.

“We are developing local community outreach work and looking to extend our debt advice work with housing associations. We are also implementing a programme of quality standards across the CHAS groups to ensure services remain accessible and effective.

“As an organisation that has been going for over 40 years, we are aware that many of our supporters who have stayed with us are now elderly. We need to ensure that their concerns about provision for older people are being met.”

Charles Frazer, Director of St.Mungo’s, described an experience that St.Mungo’s had carried out opening a temporary shelter for elderly rough sleepers. “It was the first of its kind in the UK and was set up to test the theory that the scale of homelessness amongst older people is much greater than commonly believed. The particular problem is that they are not as visible as other groups, typically because they feel intimidated by younger more aggressive street cultures. In just under two years outreach workers contacted 652 people, only four of whom were under 50.

“One of the distinctive features of the hostel was it had a drop in centre attached to it. This let people become accustomed to the idea of living indoors without having to go through any formalities of booking in. It was extremely successful – 150 people used it, staying on average two weeks, even though 80 per cent had been homeless for 10 years. What was particularly encouraging was that 70 per cent of them moved into some kind of accommodation including sheltered projects.

"The main issue both in the drop in centre and the hostel was health: 55 per cent had a health problem, some severe; 39 per cent had a mental illness, 58 per cent were heavy drinkers, 15 per cent were frequently incontinent and 50 people were hospitalised.

"This is a multi-disadvantaged group of people.

"Our plan for the future is to put this experiment on a permanent basis although we had real difficulties in getting statutory funding. It's a mystery to us why the needs of elderly homeless people are ignored by the statutory sector".

Touching on four broader issues, he said the question of magnet or strategic provision was a big concern. "We are always told when we set up a project that we import homelessness into a borough. This raises serious questions about who is prepared to back strategic provision.

"Access to community care funding is absolutely critical as long as those funds are cash limited and restricted to local authorities it is unlikely that 'unpopular' groups will see any benefit. The twin issues of planning consent and community care funding must be addressed."

On the question of specialist projects he said it was quite clear that age specific projects are able to attract a more vulnerable client group and retain them longer than generalist projects.

On the issue of whose responsibility it is? He said the role of health for this client group could not be over-estimated. The acid test of how 'joined up' Whitehall wanted to become would be seen by the extent to which the needs of elderly rough sleepers were acknowledged and action taken.

"I hope that one of the outcomes of today will be that service providers gain confidence in the work that is going on in the field and that we work more closely together to raise the profile of this issue."

The workshops

Five workshops discussed the crucial issues of outreach, resettlement, prevention, multiple needs and user involvement, and reported back to the conference:

Outreach

The workshop concluded that the main issue was the quality of the outreach service. "It is very important to go and search older people out and not wait for them to come to you.

"People are often isolated so it is important to share knowledge between workers and agencies and enquire of other people on the streets," said members.

Having located older homeless people, the quality of the ensuing interaction was vital, they said. "So often people on the streets can feel patronised by young outreach workers who offer services without a real understanding of what their needs and problems are."

The process of defining the real needs of older people would take a considerable amount of time. "There are barriers which homeless people often erect - a fear of change, a fear of failure, a great deal of anger about the situation they find themselves in and a fear of death because people often associate going indoors as a final step. So the whole process of defining needs must be based on building up trust and respect."

Another important issue was the need to give people choices, not forcing the pace but maintaining a constructive dialogue, ensuring that services were built around what they needed, not what providers thought they did.

The workshop's final issue was about continuity and providing 'joined-up' services. "The fact is that the fragmentation of service is one of the reasons people are on the streets in the first place. There needs to be a much more constructive dialogue."

Resettlement

The workshop discussed how resettlement could break the cycle of older people becoming homeless again. Its debate covered a wide range of issues and came up with five key points:

- If you give people a choice to change if they want, the cycle will often be broken. The choice for example could be a heavy drinkers' project or permanent or temporary accommodation
- Choice needs to be appropriate to an individual's circumstances and availability
- Goals need to be realistic and take into account people's strengths and weaknesses
- Funders need to be aware and to be realistic. They have a need to measure effectiveness – but who decides on effectiveness?
- More joint working is needed. Introducing a system of tracking people would make sure processes do not break down and that effective good quality services are provided
- The focus must be on the person and not on the problem. Individuality is the key

Prevention

An important issue for this workshop was the need to define the success of preventative measures. One suggestion was that a successful outcome was when a person had been in their home for six months, without incurring rent arrears. The key points for the workshop were:

- Access to good advice and information, leading to a better use of specialist agencies
- The need for early intervention, recognising that early referrals can prevent homelessness and minimise harm, while mistrust sends people back on the streets
- The importance of recognising the benefits that prevention brings, including the economic benefits and personal benefits of improved quality of life and self-esteem
- The importance of continuous publicity to raise awareness
- The need for training and education
- The importance of influencing policy makers and the need for providers, professionals and practitioners to be involved in decision making by sitting on key policy making bodies and programmes

Multiple needs

This workshop began by looking at the issues of specialist care for people with multiple needs; how these needs could be met and the high costs involved; problems around assessment which need to be ironed out and questions of how appropriate are the current levels of care.

Particular concerns were the issue of multiple needs funding for people with complex needs. Current systems of assessment and the way local authorities responded was felt to be slow and an additional problem was the client group was an unpopular one.

“Out of our in-depth discussion came a conclusion that what we need over the next 12 months is a campaign to raise awareness among the government, public and policy makers,” said the workshop members.

Their key points were:

- The present situation is scandalous. There are old people dying on the streets because they are falling through the gaps in service provision. The human cost needs to be taken on board
- The current situation is not effective. We need to look at the cost effectiveness of what is happening now and recognise that if we spend money on getting primary care treatment we can save on other costs
- Funding for elderly homeless people should be ring-fenced
- There should be a statutory lead in partnership funding in order to get the services we need

User involvement

The workshop concluded that to ensure effective participation, proper resources and support were needed both for staff and for service users who may be involved in training or mentoring roles.

“We discussed the communication skills and how important it is to really listen to each other, show each other respect and ensure there is an accurate representation of what the group wants. It’s about having a shared agenda, allowing people to put their views across and not allowing one or two people to hijack that process.”

The workshop said:

- Groups should be open and flexible and people should not feel excluded
- It is important to be clear about the boundaries within the group right at the beginning, and to ensure that these are negotiated with service users
- Within the group, have a minimum of rules but be clear what they are. Make sure terms of reference are based on shared values within the group
- Funders need to be educated about the way they look at services and the way they respond to them if the process of change is to be implemented
- There is a need for pro-active research. It is important to have clear mechanisms for consultation - it should not be contained in a specific group but should consist of going out to talk to people to see what they want
- It is important that people within the group feel positive and enthusiastic. The work should relate to people’s interests from the beginning. That’s the key to getting people involved and then addressing the wider issues

An agenda for older people

The conference discussed the issues of whether older homeless people were an unpopular group and how attitudes could be changed. One view was that they appeared to be unpopular with statutory funders but the general public had responded generously to appeals. It was suggested that statutory funders were looking for more sophisticated outcome measures and a long term solution might be to get users to define their own outcomes and use those to determine whether projects had been successful or not.

One delegate suggested that the Government had a preference for short term funding and a quick fix approach whereas working with older homeless people was long term, slow and painstaking work.

Other issues were the benefits of spending money on prevention, the need for more collaborative action between statutory and voluntary agencies and for a more strategic approach to funding to be developed. One suggestion was for a national agency to ensure that unpopular groups did not lose out.

The possibility of ring-fencing specific funding for older homeless people was discussed, with an alternative idea that local authority community care plans should include action plans for the homeless which would make authorities accountable for their performance. The idea of accessing private sector funding was also discussed.

Action points

A number of action points drawn from the conference will be used to measure progress over the year:

- Develop and promote models for preventative services that maintain and support older homeless people in their accommodation after resettlement
- Provide specialist resettlement services that recognise the additional and distinctive needs of older homeless people
- Seek to improve the quality of housing advice directed at older people as part of a wider preventative strategy
- Set up training programmes designed to ensure that workers and managers have the necessary skills, knowledge and understanding to work effectively with older people
- Develop new models of service provision, through action research, based on the needs and aspirations of older clients
- Promote the need to allocate and ring-fence statutory funding for vulnerable older homeless people as part of community care and housing support services
- Promote specialist outreach services that take a proactive role in engaging older rough sleepers with mainstream services
- Encourage the adoption of policies designed to tackle older homelessness as part of local authority homelessness strategies
- Educate funders on the need for a more intensive, proactive and long-term approach towards provision for older homeless people
- Promote the development of a range of move-on accommodation that reflects the diversity of need among older clients

Help the Aged
207-221 Pentonville Road
London N1 9UZ