

THE UK COALITION ON OLDER HOMELESSNESS

RESPONSE TO THE DTLR CONSULTATION ON THE EXTENTION OF PRIORITY NEED

1. SUMMARY OF THE COALITION RESPONSE

In response to the Government's consultation on the extension of the priority need categories the Coalition believes that:

- a) *all those over 50 who are currently sleeping rough or who have a history of rough sleeping should automatically be considered vulnerable and accepted for rehousing.*

We would like revisions in the Code of Guidance to:

- b) *promote a greater recognition of vulnerability due to old age in those homeless people who are over 50 years old;*
- c) *encourage local authorities to deploy targeted outreach and advice services that enable vulnerable older homeless people to exercise their statutory rights.*

2. BACKGROUND

From past research it has been estimated that between 29 and 39 per cent of rough sleepers are over 50. A recent study of older rough sleepers in London found that 834 people over 50 (including 43 aged 70 years or older) slept rough at some time between April 1999 and March 2000 (Crane & Warnes 2000). Many older people often spend longer sleeping rough - a survey carried out in 1996 found that 63% of people over 50 had been sleeping rough for over 5 years compared with 25% of younger people who had spent a similar period of time on the streets (Central London Street Monitor 1996). There are many older people living in inappropriate temporary accommodation unable to access move-on accommodation or long term care and support. An estimated 21,040 were living in hostel accommodation in the England and an estimated 26,940 were living 'unofficially' in bed and breakfast in England and Wales (Crane 1999).

The Coalition welcomes the extension of the priority needs categories and we hope that this will be of benefit to older homeless people leaving institutional care. However, we are concerned about the continuing neglect of older homeless people within the current legislative framework and Code of Guidance. This neglect is reflected in how few services there are designed to meet the specific needs of older homeless people and also the difficulties they experience in making contact with statutory services. Older people tend to be less visible than other groups and are less assertive in making demands on mainstream services. This is why we believe it is critical that local authorities take a proactive approach to this problem. We believe in the need for a change

in the priority need status of rough sleepers who are over 50 and revisions to the Code of Guidance.

3. PRIORITY NEED AND OLDER HOMELESS PEOPLE

In our view all those over 50 forced to sleep rough or who have had a history of sleeping rough should automatically be considered vulnerable and given priority status. Theoretically this group should already be accepted as being in priority need under the current legislation. Despite this there is a wide variation in the way older people are treated by local authorities and many older rough sleepers simply do not make any contact with their local authority.

'A survey of local authorities found that only 1 per cent of older homeless people presenting to them were from the street homeless category, which suggests that such people rarely come forward to local authorities for rehousing.' (Hawes, 1997)

Although some older homeless people will be accepted as vulnerable on other grounds we are concerned that vulnerability due to age is not being recognised. We believe that there are a number of compelling reasons for creating a special category of priority need for people sleeping rough who are over 50, described below.

3.1. Impact of rough sleeping on older people

There is a much higher mortality rate for homeless people forced to sleep rough. A homeless person over 50 (and in fact even younger) becomes statistically less and less likely to survive or recover from rough sleeping.

'Mortality rates among homeless people are high. The average age of death of homeless people is reported variously at 42 to 51 years of age (Grenier, 1996; Keyes and Kennedy, 1992; Wright, 1989). This implies that many long-term homeless people die before they reach old age, and that older homeless people are either a minority of survivors or those who become homeless late in life.' (Crane, 1997)

Many agencies working with rough sleepers will confirm that very few older people are able to survive for any length of time on the streets once they are over 50. Those who do survive beyond this age are in the minority and often suffer a serious deterioration in both their physical and mental health. There is evidence to demonstrate that rough sleeping accelerates the ageing process which means the people in their 50's (and younger) may exhibit characteristics expected in an older age group. (Kelling 1991)

3.2. Physical and mental health of older homeless people

The Help the Aged report "Homeless Truths" outlined the health profile of many homeless older people sleeping rough or living in inappropriate hostel accommodation.

'Physical health problems are much worse among the homeless than domiciled older people. Common problems include respiratory conditions, tuberculosis, hypertension, arthritis, oedema and peripheral vascular disease, gastrointestinal complaints, alcohol-related problems, and trauma. Poor health is exacerbated by dire living conditions, hazardous lifestyles and the decreased physiological reserves of advanced age. Malnutrition, inadequate clothing and shelter, prolonged standing, walking and exposure, and unhygienic and unsanitary habits all contribute.' (Crane 1997)

3.3. Failure of local authorities to engage with older homeless people

There are few specialist services for older homeless people compared with other groups with specific needs. Older people tend to avoid mainstream services because they feel they are designed for a younger client group and therefore do not address their needs or concerns. Some older people find these services intimidating and are fearful of intimidation and violence by other service users. Local authorities often do not recognise the needs of older homeless people or do not accept that this group should be treated as a separate category with specific issues. The situation is exacerbated because older homeless people tend to be less assertive and less visible than other groups. Older people with a long history of rough sleeping or who have passed in and out of temporary accommodation are often justifiably cynical or suspicious about mainstream services because they may feel that they have been let down in the past. For all these reasons older people need a more proactive and long term approach by local authorities with services that are tailored to their needs.

3.5 Death of older homeless people on the streets

Given the overwhelming evidence that beyond the age of 50 a homeless person is much more like to die or suffer ill health on the streets we feel there is a clear ethical responsibility to give this group priority status. As we have previously argued this group should automatically be considered vulnerable and in priority need. However, a strengthening of the legal position would send out a clear message to local authorities that the position of older homeless people needs to be taken seriously.

4. CODE OF GUIDANCE

There is a pressing need for the Code of Guidance to be revised on older homelessness in the light of recent research findings and advice on good practice. The Code of Guidance should make a stronger statement on older homelessness based on the issues raised in this paper. It could help local authorities to recognise older homelessness as a legitimate concern requiring specific action. It should also serve to link into guidance provided to local authorities on the development of homelessness strategies and to highlight the need for a distinctive approach towards older people.

4.1 Recognising vulnerability

At the current time older people can already be accepted as homeless due to vulnerability. However, we are concerned that there is great variability in local authority interpretations of their responsibilities towards older people. Some local authority housing departments accept men and women aged 60 years and over, whilst others only accept men aged at least 65 years. Given these variations, and failure to recognise people over 50, there is a need for a clearer definition of vulnerability due to old age to achieve a fairer and more consistent approach.

As discussed above we have particular worries about the identification of vulnerability in older homeless people over the age of 50. All the evidence suggests that older rough sleepers over 50 are likely to be vulnerable given the impact rough sleeping has on their physical and mental well-being. We feel that the Code of Guidance urgently needs revision on this point. At the very least the Code of Guidance should use 50 as a reference point for consideration of old age rather than 60.

4.2 Outreach and access to services

We believe that the Guidance needs to place much greater emphasis on the need for local authorities to make contact with vulnerable older people. Given the factors we have described it is less likely that older homeless people will come into contact with statutory services which therefore requires a much more proactive approach to this group. Local authorities should consider developing specialist outreach services to make contact with older rough sleepers as well as those living in inappropriate temporary accommodation.

4.3 Community care assessment

Many older homeless people are unable to obtain a community care assessment and therefore are unable to access the range of care and support they should be entitled to – this is especially true of people under 65. Many hostels provide support services to older people, but with very limited resources in the absence of statutory assistance. Often older people with care needs are trapped in hostels because of a lack of move-on accommodation that offers appropriate care packages. The Coalition believes that this situation needs to be urgently addressed and that local authorities should take proactive steps to ensure that older people have access to the care packages they are entitled to.

4.3 Preventative service

The Coalition believes that the Guide needs to make more specific reference to the prevention of older homelessness. This should include providing long term support and care for resettled ex-homeless older people and services to address the social isolation that often leads to a

reoccurrence of homelessness. Local authorities also need to develop advice and advocacy services geared towards older people. More specifically authorities should develop 'intervention services' that help older people in situations that are likely to trigger homelessness such as physical or mental ill health, relationship breakdown, bereavement and financial problems. We know of several cases where older people have been evicted for arrears simply because they were not claiming the appropriate benefits - a situation that could easily be rectified. The Coalition believes that agencies should not evict people over 50 for rent arrears until their situation has been fully assessed.

5. CONCLUSION

The Coalition believes that there are compelling reasons to ensure that older rough sleepers over 50 are automatically considered vulnerable. We also believe that local authorities must be given much clearer practical guidance on their approach to all aspects of older homelessness and its prevention. Finally, we believe that given the characteristics of older homelessness it is vital that local authorities develop proactive services targeted at this group to ensure that they have access to the advice and assistance they are entitled to under the new legislation.

References

- Crane, Maureen, **Homeless Truths, Help the Aged**, 1997
Crane, Maureen, **Understanding Older Homeless People**, Open University Press 1999
Kelling, Kenneth, **Older Homeless People in London**, Age Concern, 1991
Kitchen, Gary & Welsh, Caroline, **Outside In:Tackling the Social Exclusion of Older Homeless People**, Help the Aged, 1998
Hawes, Derek, **Older People and Homelessness**, Policy Press, 1997
Crane M. and Warnes A.M. **Evictions and prolonged homelessness**. Housing Studies, 15 (5), 757-773. 2000

The UK Coalition on Older Homelessness

The UK Coalition is made up of national and local homelessness agencies concerned with promoting the rights of older homeless people. These include:

- Shelter
- Crisis
- NHA
- CHAS
- Help the Aged
- Aged Concern
- Salvation Army
- Bondway HA
- Thames Reach
- St.Mungo's HA

For further information contact Joe Oldman (Secretary to the Coalition), Help the Aged, 207-221 Pentonville Road, London N1 9UZ. Tel 020 7278 1114.

Details about the Coalition can be obtained on our web site:
www.olderhomelessness.org.uk