

## Review of HANE Conference 2004

**Overcoming Homelessness in the North East: Developing Good Practice**  
**Organised by Housing Action North East [HANE]**  
**Margaret Clitheroe Centre, Ushaw College. 11 June 2004**

### Programme

- 10.00 Welcome & Domestic Arrangements: Ian Zass-Ogilvie, Chief Officer, Churches' Regional Commission
- 10.10 Setting the Scene: Shaks Ghosh, Chief Executive Officer, Crisis
- 10.30 Some individual experiences from young people working with the Inline Youth Voice project in Newcastle
- 11.15 Workshops :
- A Update from Supporting People Regional Implementation Group - Martin Berry, Chairman
  - B Developing the Nightstop Service at Regional Level - Linda Sharp, Project Manager, Nightstop NE
  - C Development of Supported Lodgings - Jane Bateson, Supported Lodgings Co-ordinator
  - D History of Hartlepool Breakfast Club - Roz Hall, Project Leader
  - E Development of a Joint Resettlement Protocol for People Discharged from Prison - Richard Taylor, Probation Service
- 1.10 Workshops
- 2.10 Keynote Address - Terrie Alafat  
Director of Homelessness and Housing Support Directorate
- 2.40 Who's paying for all this and what do they want in return?  
Nigel Rogers, Director, SITRA
- 3.00 Making the Links - Making the Difference  
John Rogers, Housing Action North East
- 3.15 Conference Summary: Shaks Ghosh, Chief Executive Officer, Crisis

## **1. Setting the scene: Shaks Ghosh.**

1.1 Shaks started with two apologies: first, as she is from London, much of what she will say is London centred; second, Crisis works with single people and their passion for that area of work will also be reflected in her remarks.

1.2 How do we take people from homelessness and isolation to integration? That is the theme of today. We are talking about people who are not only homeless. They also have multiple problems in their lives that lead to social isolation and a lack of integration into the community.

1.3 Current changes in society, described in the Salvation Army's book "The Paradox of Prosperity" published in 2001, mean that the standard of living will rise, and for most of us life will be good. But for 10% of society it won't be, and these are the people we are concerned about. Once you are aware of what loneliness, isolation and lack of community are about; you can see it all around you. It arises from the breakdown of the traditional family, increasing numbers of single person households, money problems and the ever increasing range of choices we face - in supermarkets, in holidays or by changing jobs every 2 or 3 years. We all face more complex and pressured lives.

1.4 Despite dramatic falls in the number sleeping rough, homelessness of other kinds is on the increase - by 30% over the last 7 years. Almost 400 000 live in emergency shelters, B&B's, hostels, squats and sleeping in friends' houses. That's nearly half a million people - the "hidden homeless" not showing up in the official statistics.

1.5 Almost 60% of homelessness is due to relationship breakdown, such as when young people leave home before they are ready for the transition or, divorce. The isolation and loneliness incurred by tenants living in hostels means that 25% of tenancies fail. Mental illness and substance abuse underpin the long-term downward spiral of problems experienced by 80% of the homeless and hostel dwellers.

1.6 There has been a big increase in investment in public services over the past 7 years, but it has not made a difference to homelessness. It is still increasing - despite the Homelessness Act and the Rough Sleepers Initiative. There is an underworld of transition housing in the homelessness cycle - moving from hostel to hostel, friends' floors, back to the street, camping on another floor. It is a problem not of bricks and mortar, but of people in crisis. How do we empower people to move on in their lives? How do statutory agencies incorporate mutuality and interdependence into the services they provide? We need to change the rhetoric and focus from finance, bricks and mortar and housing programmes to PEOPLE!

1.7 What is homelessness? First - we must take for granted that people need somewhere to live. We must go beyond that. Homelessness badly deskills people and isolates them. To counteract it we need to re-skill and integrate people - to enable them to re-enter society. Interventions must change from giving to enabling - facilitating the processes by which people help themselves. It is about community, citizenship, about expecting that you have a responsibility. It is about skills, self-esteem and confidence.

1.8 We must move from the traditionally accepted hierarchy of needs - food and shelter, then safety and security, then belonging, self-esteem and finally self-actualisation. Instead, we should see the fundamental interrelationship between all these needs. This means working from the outset with issues of self-esteem, confidence, skills and a sense of belonging to a community, not after we have dealt with somewhere to live.

1.9 Social capital is a buzzword today - essentially focussing on the networks, norms, relationships, values and informal sanctions that shape society's interactions within communities. As Robert Putnam's books suggest, it is about inclusive communities, access to health, housing, welfare and fundamentally is about empowerment.

1.10 2 examples to finish with. The soup and blankets approach is easy. Really facing up to the problems is more difficult. People attending our Skylight Programme are enabled to put their homelessness problems into a wider context. It is not just a place to live, but a place to learn, build self esteem and catch up with the time they have lost whilst their lives have been "on hold" waiting for accommodation. Skylight is an activity centre for homeless people on Commercial Street. We call our clients "members" - we are creating a club; it is their space. Literacy, numeracy, IT skills, education is combined with yoga, art, drama, cycle repair, computer building. Programmes are delivered by volunteers and tutors, with the emphasis on ownership and involvement. It has been a fantastic success - helping people to beat boredom and develop self-esteem, using that "dead" time living in hostels to engage and "grow" themselves.

1.11 The Urban Village, financed by Gilmore, will build a real, mixed community of 50% homeless, 50% key workers plus a range of support services and jobs, centred on a village green. There will be a church, café and other commercial activities where people will have opportunities to try out work in a gentle way, as well as a small hospital, doctor's surgery and a central church owned community centre where Skylight activities will take place. It is not another housing project. It is about building a community to which people belong and where they are able to re-integrate into society.

## **2. Inline Youth Voice Project.**

2.1 Inline [Independent Living NE] is a Children's Society project working with young homeless people. Some young people from the project spoke of their own stories and experiences and of the support Inline has given them. Being able to stand up and speak in this way was perhaps the greatest witness to the success and achievements of the project.

2.2 Their personal journeys described the transition from depression, drugs, drink and despair to support with reading, writing and getting a flat. Driven from home by violence and abuse, they got professional help from the Newcastle Housing Advice Centre and Inline. Some young people progress to volunteering with Inline.

2.3 Set up in 1997 to help young people in crisis, Inline works to reduce homelessness by giving one to one support, training opportunities and assistance with independent living skills such as cooking, money management and shopping. Receiving benefit support of £44.05 per week is not enough for a young person to live on. Inline acts as the landlord instead of the local authority, collecting rents whilst at the same time offering advice and support.

2.4 The young people also come together monthly, sharing their experiences and learning, giving presentations and working on key issues that they are facing. Step by step, in a relaxed, accepting and friendly atmosphere, the young people develop their motivation to learn and work. Some have got qualifications and training through Connexions and Connexions Direct. Some are now advising agencies on how to approach and work with young people with respect rather than looking down at them, and how best to help them with forms.

2.5 In response to a question from the floor, they offered their skills to National, Regional and Local agencies to improve their services by listening to the experiences of young peoples' journeys.

## **3. Terrie Alafat: Director of Homelessness and Housing Support Directorate.**

3.1 Terrie gave the national and strategic context to tackling homelessness. The Homelessness Act of 2002 required all local authorities to have a prevention strategy by July 2003, to see homelessness in a more holistic way and to encourage new responses to homelessness. It provided funding of £100 million 2002/3, and £260 million in the current spending review.

3.2 Statutory homelessness is increasing: from 100,000 in 1997/8, to 130,000 in 2002/3. In March 2002 there were more than 80,000 households in temporary accommodation; in March 2003 there were over 90,000. Currently there are about 93,000. Underpinning this is a relatively poor understanding of the causes of

homelessness - at all levels: local, regional and national. It is not just a problem in London and the SE; the greatest percentage increase in statutory homelessness is in Yorkshire and Humber and the NE. Some local homeless strategies are beginning to examine the situation in detail, but more work is needed.

3.3 What are the causes? Housing shortages and lack of suitable housing is a problem, but underlying it all is an increase in exclusion from family and friends and increasing incidence of family breakdown.

3.4 The government's Sustainable Communities Plan sets out the longer-term vision. It is about the right type of housing in the right place - taking into account demographic changes. It is about prevention - the NE received £90,000 for homelessness preventative and strategic work for example.

3.5 Specific objectives were to reduce the numbers in B&B accommodation and to identify services needed to prevent homelessness occurring or recurring. Both have been achieved. Ongoing evaluation and implementation of local authority strategies will identify additional accommodation and support required, and to identify the services needed to prevent homelessness occurring or recurring. Some areas have 30% of applications from people who have already experienced homelessness.

3.6 There is the need to share good practice and to support local authorities in their achievements, which the Beacon Councils have been doing to good effect. Rent Deposit schemes have been used in Camden, and Harrow provides family mediation and services for domestic violence victims where family breakdown is a key cause of homelessness. Some councils have reintroduced home visits in order to improve their service, and Colchester and Waltham Forest have been using private accommodation to extend choice. There are a series of Roadshows around the country at the moment - running practical sessions with local authorities and others on how to prevent homelessness. One should come to the NE in the autumn. We are also undertaking research into effective prevention schemes.

3.7 The future should see a wider take up of preventative schemes, greater use of the private rented sector, work with people in temporary accommodation to ensure they can move on with their lives as well as working with Housing Associations and local authorities on allocations. We will look at standards, access to services, housing management policies and appropriate services for specific client groups.

3.8 We will look at hostel provision to ensure that it is more effective in assisting in the move towards independent living, and to prevent people drifting in and out of hostels and back onto the streets. We will research into work with the BME sector - there are very few good examples of work here, and it is a significant gap in provision.

3.9 All of this is based on evidence gathered through performance monitoring, and across government departments. We are working with the Home Office on the resettlement of offenders, housing advice in prisons, Helplines and domestic refuges and with DWP to improve access to benefits and advice - such as having a homelessness team in a job centre. The DoH is addressing the health needs of people. We are looking to increasing links between Supporting People Strategies and Housing Strategies.

3.10 It is a very ambitious agenda on which government, local authorities and the voluntary and community sector needs to work together.

#### **4. Nigel Rogers - Director of SITRA**

4.1 Nigel spoke as a "depressed" enthusiast for Supporting People - believing in the programme, but advocating a change from the market analogy of buyers and sellers to the ecological metaphor. Supporting People is supposed to be about managing change in the interest of vulnerable people. a new system of planning, monitoring and funding - cost effective, reliable, complementary to existing services.

4.2 His ecological metaphor ran like this: the supported housing sector was once a small, delicate flower - marginal, working in a difficult area. With Supporting People it has become a bit of a jungle. There is more money, it is bigger, and is now a major strut of the welfare state. This new form of plant life [costing £1.8 billion pa] has produced its own animal life too. At the top, Tony the Treasury Tiger, who wants to know where the money is going. Toby the Toucan from the Home Office and Paula the DoH parrot can't tell him where the jungle is coming from, nor whose fault it is that it is costing so much!

4.3 The ODPM "Push-me pull-you" speaks from both its ends. At one end it says - here's the money, it's local, go ahead according to local priorities; at the other end it says - don't rely on having the money - we've got a spending review. Neither the local authorities nor the providers know whether their environment, their ecology is going to be sustainable. There is no logic to where the money has gone, nor what really constitutes "support".

4.4 There is a failure to articulate proper linkages between the Care System and Supporting People. Access to cross-border services when homeless people move from one area of need to another is poor. There is no system for bidding for or committing to any new revenue money. Different schemes providing similar services cost widely varying amounts of money. The review of the system is a priority - but if you don't know how much money you will have, how can you issue new contracts, at what price, and are they long or short term?

Local authorities faced with this dilemma are "cheese paring", and trying to pass the risk over to the providers. Providers are going round in circles, kept in the dark.

4.5 The government seems to think that this environment of uncertainty will force providers into evolutionary change. Yet as we all know from the dinosaurs, rapid environment change can cause extinction. The ideal ecological analogy is for Supporting People to become like the Cleaner Wrasse. These little fish work in partnership, establishing cleaning stations on coral reefs where they clean sharks' mouths. The predatory sharks could easily eat the Wrasse, but they need their cleaning services. The mutually beneficial relationship is an example of symbiosis, which a properly developed Supporting People programme could achieve.

## **5. John Rogers: HANE**

5.1 Nigel's entertaining take on the uncertainties of money, long term planning mentioned vulnerable people twice - once at the beginning and once at the end. What vulnerable people need runs through everything HANE does, and at the heart of our work is to encourage everyone in the sector to talk to each other and work together. To get Housing Departments to talk to the Rent Arrears section and the Housing Benefit section; to get the Legal Services Commission and local authority and housing providers to talk to each other - and thereby to prevent some avoidable clashes and problems before they arise.

5.2 Some remarkable effects can come from simple ideas. Starter Packs for instance - a box of necessities that people who are destitute need to kick-start their tenancies. Toiletries, cleaning materials, non-perishable foodstuff etc. in boxes are given to agencies to distribute to people who are entering a tenancy for the first time. We encourage community groups to make these gifts. It is not charity. It helps those that give the boxes to get alongside vulnerable people. The vulnerable people are grateful for the practical help, and are astonished that somebody cares enough for them as an individual to make the gift.

5.3 In Easington, for example, persuaded by the Housing Officer and an Elected Member, the Primary Care Trust has donated £1000 to develop the starter pack programme. A start for joined up thinking! We need voluntary and community sector, statutory organisations and regional strategy to work together like this.

5.4 We are delighted that after 18 months of encouragement, the Regional Housing Board and GONE are including the voluntary and community sector in developing their housing strategy.

5.5 So - the silo mentality begins to fade and there is a growing realisation that housing is not simply about bricks and mortar, but about the PEOPLE who live there.

## **6. Shaks Ghosh - Summing up the day.**

6.1 The strong bonds between people here today and the agencies represented are obvious. You are already beginning to tackle the prevention agenda - going "upstream" to tackle the causes of homelessness. There are successes to celebrate, despite the anxieties, and there is a prevailing sense of optimism.

6.2 No longer are housing shortages and affordability concentrated in London and the SE. You too are grappling with price escalation and what this does to increase homelessness. Bricks and mortar don't prevent relationship breakdown. The churn in the system between hostels, B&B, temporary accommodation, people going round and round, repeat homelessness is a really big agenda. Let's not put homeless people's lives on hold whilst they are in temporary accommodation.

6.3 The big gaps are around community and skills. But let's finish with remembering those young people who spoke so eloquently about their personal journeys from despair to empowerment. You are a committed, inspiring and challenging audience. The NE should be proud!!