

Tackling the changing face of homelessness

Speech by Ruth Kelly MP at the Andy Ludlow Awards on 14 November 2006.

Thank you Councillor [Jamie] Carswell for that welcome. And my thanks to London Councils for organising the Andy Ludlow Awards this year.

I am delighted that my Department is a cosponsor of the Awards. For the past seven years they have played an important part in recognising excellence in innovation and good practice among projects tackling homelessness here in London. They are projects that have really made a difference to people's lives on the ground and on the streets.

Thursday is the 40th anniversary of the BBC's powerful drama documentary '*Cathy Come Home*'. In 1966 it started a debate about homelessness. Now is the time to review the real progress we have made. To look at what more needs to be done. And to ask 'How would Cathy fare in today's world?'

There is no doubt that we have made huge progress. The Homeless Persons Act, passed by the Labour Government of 1977, at last put a duty on local authorities to find accommodation for homeless applicants. But there then followed a period, during the 1980s, of neglect and indifference to the plight of the most vulnerable in our society. This was our legacy in 1997.

We took up the challenge, and have turned the tide. We have met the Prime Minister's target to cut rough sleeping by two thirds. Since 1998 rough sleeping has fallen by 73 per cent. In England there are now around 500 people on the streets each night, compared with over 1800 just eight years ago. That is still 500 too many, but it is a great improvement.

The scandal of large numbers of families stuck in bed and breakfast accommodation for long periods has now ended. The number of new cases of homelessness is at a 23-year low, despite our widening the net in 2002 to help more vulnerable people.

But there should be no place for homelessness in 21st century Britain. We are the fourth largest economy in the world and see signs of increasing prosperity all around us. That is why I am personally committed to doing my utmost in the fight against homelessness and the causes of it. We cannot talk about social justice without this commitment.

Of course, part of the long-term solution has to be in making more homes available. That's why we are aiming to build 75,000 new social rented homes between 2005/06 and 2007/08. In response to the Barker Review we committed to setting out even more ambitious plans in the next Comprehensive Spending Review. And I am also looking forward to John Hill's report on the future of social housing early next year.

But we also need to do more to tackle the fundamental causes of homelessness - and I will say more about this in a minute.

Our record also compares well with other countries. Yvette Cooper will be opening an international seminar next week bringing together experts and practitioners from around the world to share our experience, ideas and good practice.

All this is encouraging. We have achieved it through investment - more than £200 million over the past 3 years alone - through legislation, and through taking tough decisions.

And we have achieved it with the help of Shelter, Homeless Link and many other voluntary and community sector organisations. Not to mention the thousands of people who work to support people facing homelessness and to prevent people becoming homeless in the first place.

We have a vastly-improved safety net to make sure that families and vulnerable people are much less likely to face the tragic consequences of becoming homeless. But a strong safety net is not enough.

There is much more to do. We cannot slow down, and we are not going to.

With nearly 94,000 households still living in temporary accommodation, there is no room for complacency. With vulnerable young people being placed in bed and breakfast hotels, we must do better still.

The evidence is that we are successfully tackling the familiar, highly visible face of homelessness. Cathy has come in, off the street. But now we must meet new challenges and deal with the changing nature of homelessness.

Take temporary accommodation. The quality of the accommodation has improved enormously and 92 per cent of homeless families now have their own front door. But it is still a problem.

This is a complex challenge. So in 2007/08 we are increasing the funding to £74 million - up by 12 per cent - in order to support a new package of measures. This is in addition to specific funding such as the £90 million on improving hostels and the £30 million on our Extra Homes pilot. All this is underpinned by our Supporting People programme, through which we are investing more than £5 billion to help people maintain independent lives by staying in more settled housing.

The package of measures builds on best practice and on what is already making a difference around the country.

In my view, it is unacceptable for a civilised society like ours to expect homeless 16 and 17 year olds to be on their own in bed and breakfast hotels. This is one of the worst faces of homelessness today. In many cases their parents are no longer willing to have them at home. Nearly one in four of new cases falls into this category.

These are young people at their most vulnerable, who are a short step from throwing away their future and never realising their potential.

We are making a commitment today that by 2010 16 and 17 year olds will not be placed in bed and breakfast hotels unless it is an emergency.

One measure is that local authorities and local partners will establish supported lodging schemes across the country. Like the scheme that is working well in Colchester. Young people will have safe accommodation as well as advice and mediation services. Mediation in particular might help many young people return to their family home, or make a successful transition to the next stage of their life.

I see one that of the shortlisted projects - the Alone in London schools project - provides mediation support to young people and helps avoid these relationship breakdowns. It puts prevention firmly in focus.

In fact the breakdown of relationships in the home accounts for many older people being homeless too. Around 20 per cent of all homelessness begins this way. In many cases, mediation has proved the answer already - and could be for many more. In future, we will expect all local authorities to offer mediation services when things start to go wrong.

I also want to see hostels as places of change, offering more than temporary accommodation. We need to end the 'revolving door' of homelessness and help people use time spent in hostels for training and acquiring new skills.

Another shortlisted project - Look Ahead's Customer Involvement Programme - trains hostel residents to take an active part in shaping the hostel services. These skills can help them find work and a settled home.

Before I came here today I visited The Thames Reach project - ***Moving In, Moving On***. It trains young people living in hostels and supported housing in really practical painting and decorating skills.

The project has received support through the Hostels Capital Improvement Programme. Support ranges from small grants to the £17 million being invested in Arlington House in Camden.

Next year we will also be publishing a guide for local authorities and agencies to help with transforming hostels - from just being a roof over your head, to being a spring board to a job and a home.

The longer term solution must be to move people from temporary accommodation into settled homes. Everyone needs a decent home at a price they can afford, but for many vulnerable people the hurdles to getting there seem high. That is why we are speeding up our programme for delivering new social homes.

Later this month the Housing Corporation will be publishing its new strategy on tackling homelessness with prevention at its heart. The strategy will promote best practice across the housing association sector with programmes on life skills support, debt advice and rent deposit schemes. This is about offering the right help at the right time to prevent homelessness.

Perhaps most important of all, there will be plans for housing associations to work far more closely with local authorities. Together they will be able to bring people out of homelessness much faster.

Making progress is about offering a joined up solution. One of our shortlisted projects - The Training for Life's Home Work Apprentice - helps provide employment, settled accommodation and support for single homeless people.

The East Thames Working Future project, on the other hand, is helping families with dependent children in temporary accommodation. Pilot households receive subsidised rents, training and employment support.

Our £30 million Extra Homes pilot will help deliver 1000 extra settled homes for families currently in temporary accommodation. And it will help test out what works.

So there is a great deal happening. I have no doubt that Cathy's chances today would be significantly better, with support, advice and the likelihood of a settled home. But we have serious challenges to face and we must not lose momentum. These are the issues on which our society should be judged.

I am confident we will meet those challenges. In fact I am determined we will. And the work you are recognising here today, helps give me that confidence.

Like Newham's single homeless project helping offenders with a history of substance abuse to live independently.

Like Cardboard Citizens offering 750 homeless people a year workshops on theatre, dance and music.

Incidentally, you will notice that I have mentioned all six of the shortlisted projects. *This shows not only how relevant they are to our aims and priorities - but also that I have no idea who the winner is!*

So I will finish by congratulating everyone here on what you have achieved so far. But don't stop there.

We **have** reduced the number of rough sleepers by almost three-quarters. We **have** ended the scandal of bed and breakfast accommodation. We **have** started an ambitious programme to build more social and other affordable housing. We **are** tackling the challenges of prevention, through mediation and other timely support. And we **are** giving people training and skills to get on, as well as more hope of a settled home.

But we all have a great deal more to do. We need to raise our efforts to the next level. I am committed to doing this - I hope you will join me.

Thank you.

Speech by Ruth Kelly MP on 14 November 2006.