

London Delegation Report on the attendance at 'Community Care: the Utrecht model in practice' conference.

Utrecht, the Netherlands, 29th – 30th of March 2006

Background

The local authority in Utrecht in the Netherlands organised an international conference in March 2006 to promote the approach they have adopted over the past five years to deal with the interrelated issues of homelessness, street population issues drug addiction, street drinking, asylum seekers and prostitution.

Utrecht had a specific and high profile problem in that it is an affluent area within 30 minutes traveling time of Amsterdam. It is also a transport hub for the entire country. The public transport infrastructure was built around a 1970's shopping centre which has a number of subways and tunnels. By the late 1990's these had been taken over by a street population – mainly displaced by a tougher approach by the authorities in cities such as Amsterdam. The situation was similar that experience in areas such as the South Bank or Lincoln Inns Fields in London in the early 1990's.

Many of the techniques adopted by Utrecht to counter the problems were similar or identical to those adopted in London a decade ago. The specific approaches however are in many ways unique and appear to have had long term sustainability designed into the approach. As such they offer useful insights into methods which could be adopted by individual London borough or, possibly more usefully, sub regionally. In particular, there appear to be lessons to be learned with respect to street population and employment/training initiatives.

The conference was attended by approximately 300 delegates over 2 days. The delegates were mainly Dutch, but invites were sent to a number of foreign countries, and a small number of delegates attended from Latvia, the USA, Austria, Denmark and the UK.

The UK delegation consisted of a small group from London sponsored by the London Housing Foundation.

The UK delegates were:

David Fisher	Head of Outreach and Community Services, Broadway
Adam Rees	Outreach Manager, St Mungos
Trevor Pask	Contracts and Commissioning Manager, LBHF
Rachel Snoad	Principal Supporting People Manager, LBHF

Howard Sinclair (Chief Executive, Broadway) was one of the speakers at the conference and presented a paper on the British approach to homelessness, the roles undertaken by an agency such as Broadway and the particular problems faced by an inner London authority such as Hammersmith and Fulham. Additional international perspective was also provided by the delegate from the USA with a presentation on what was in effect a subsidized private sector leasing scheme operating in New York for former rough sleepers.

Main observations

The conference was organized over two days. Day one was organised as a traditional conference with speakers, workshops and plenary sessions. Day two was comprised of an extensive series of site visits to see some of the initiatives and projects in operation. Some sessions were conducted in English, but everything else was translated from Dutch into English.

Of note to the British delegation was the degree of challenge displayed by the facilitator during the conference based day. The opening session in particular involved the heads of the organisations such as the police, the Salvation Army, the local authority, the health and the local housing associations being quite aggressively challenged by a facilitator on the underlying progress they had made in the authority. There were also a number of homeless or former homeless people attending the conference as delegates who gave panel members a high degree of challenge.

In summary the Utrecht model was a concerted effort to fuse funding streams, policies and staffing resources to a set of specific aims. The best analogy appears to be a city wide and fully comprehensive local area agreement. This was facilitated by the fact that the administration is unitary with the police, social services, housing etc, all covering the same geographic area. A significant fact worth mentioning is that the one area where senior professionals working with the model said there was a weakness was the failure of central government agencies such as the prison and probation services to engage.

The motivation for the adoption of the model was explored, but seems to have been strongly rooted in the fact that the heads of the main stakeholders were determined to do something. They were all forceful individuals who wanted to work together. The facilitator of a panel discussion pressed the main stakeholders on this issue with the challenge that the model could fold if enough of them left.

The main positive features identified over the two days were as follows:

- Utrecht genuinely appeared to have pooled funding and created a large local area agreement for the entire city which has clearly been effective in removing a highly visible problem. This is evidenced by the changes to the physical environment in the main shopping mall and also the

clearing out from the 'tunnel' underneath of a significant number of addicts and rough sleepers. A key factor seems to have been the high profile political leadership (and empathy) given by a leading town Alderman to tackling the problem.

- Street population issues definitely were approached with a carrot and a stick. Emergency and move on accommodation, access to services and the like were all available in quality and quantity, but the alternative of living on the street and not engaging was not an option. The threshold for this could be pretty low such as joining a communal work party to pick up litter for a couple of hours per day, but some engagement was necessary.
- For people in accommodation including mainstream social tenants there were some very impressive training and employment facilities on estates and/or attached to hostels – cafes, furniture reclamation, tenant owned and run cafes on estates, jewelry making workshops etc. These would all appear to be exemplars which could be modified and form part of initiatives such as Neighborhood Renewal Fund bids in the UK
- Utrecht were approaching the dependency on drugs in an innovative way compared to the UK, but in a similar way to the harm minimisation approach adopted by many agencies in the UK for people dependent on alcohol e.g. Market Lane hostel. In Utrecht they had established specific hostels for drug users where they were allowed to use in their own rooms. The same with the 24 hour drop in centre. At the Specialist drug unit they are trialing under strict conditions the prescription of heroin as well as methadone to users as a way of managing the dependency.

Less positive aspects were:

- The city is basically closed and anyone who is not a 'host referral', to use SP terminology, is returned to where they came from. Utrecht operates a strict reconnection type policy to refer service users back to the city of their origin – usually Amsterdam. Clearly a motivational factor for a large number of the visiting Dutch delegates was to explore the possibilities of employing a similar approach in their own authorities.
- Apart from some clear success stories – such as a scheme to encourage former rough sleepers into having the confidence to tell their stories, service users were not prominent at all during the site visits. In one instance – a visit to a metal working project - this was explained as being due to health and safety issues given the numbers of visitors in a confined areas – but there were other projects such as an organised street cleaning gang near the railway station where health and safety could not be used as an issue for the non involvement of the service users.

- People from BME groups were clearly disproportionately represented among service user groups compared to staff and the general population, but there was no reference was made to this as a specific issue during the conference.
- There appears to be a very similar approach to what in the UK would be called A8 workers¹ and 'dis-benefitted' asylum seekers. In a similar manner as the UK, this client group is not eligible to be assisted by a local authority. The impression was that this group was not huge – possibly given the proximity of Amsterdam – but that certain individuals could cause specific problems. Again in a parallel with the UK, there were some frustrations expressed by local authority staff in Utrecht at the policies of central government with respect to asylum seekers and A8 workers.

Clearly, with a different legislative framework, and culture in the Netherlands, not all of the practices we saw can be directly translated to a local authority in London. The different laws with respect to drugs for example made the work of the Dutch outreach workers and hostel managers much more realistic in some ways than comparable practices in the UK.

A significant barrier to operating comparable training and employment schemes in the UK, would appear however to be cultural. For example the first reaction by some of the UK delegates on seeing the metal working project and some of the employment and training schemes operated in Utrecht, was that they could not be replicated in the UK because of health and safety issues. However, similar concerns exist in the Netherlands, and the reality was that such schemes were set up after considerable consultation and planning.

Action Points

- **Future visits**
 - Broadway has invited the local authority in Utrecht to send a delegation to the UK in early June. It is planned to show them a range of housing type projects in West London.
 - A formal request was made for a visit to be made to a Housing Needs Units.
 - Independently, officers working for Utrecht also expressed an interest in pursuing some kind of formalised information sharing or exchange program with a London authority such as Hammersmith and Fulham.

¹ People from the 8 states that acceded to the European Union in May 2004 and were not already members of the Commonwealth: Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovak Republic and Slovenia.

- **Sharing and Disseminating Learning**

- Trevor and David have been invited by the Joint K&C and H&F Rough Sleeper Stakeholders Group to give a short presentation on the Utrecht Model and possible learning from joint work across the boroughs
- Use this report as the basis for an article about the Utrecht Model in Homeless Links 'Connect' magazine

- **Service Development**

- Broadway is going to explore with partners the potential for developing a sustainable employment brokerage scheme based on the one visited in Utrecht

Trevor Pask 4/5/06