



london housing  
foundation  
tackling homelessness together

# The first, the last and the only

## The strategic importance of day centres for the homeless and vulnerable in London

March 2008

**“Day centres can be centres of excellence and choice which positively  
change lives, they can be places of change”**

Places of Change Communities and Local Government November 2006



# 1 Who are day centres for?

People visit day centres at a point of need or crisis – a point of change. Day centres are able to make the change a positive one. The day centre will prevent the situation from worsening and provide the opportunity at that crisis point for people to make positive choices and positive changes.

While day centres have traditionally focussed on homelessness or the risk of homelessness, they are increasingly developing solutions which recognise the general vulnerability of people using their services.

London has a transient population, with movement into, out of and around the Capital, as well as more settled communities with specific needs. Day centres provide a flexible response to these movements, supporting vulnerable people from and within their local community and those coming into that community and the problems they face. They are also able to support those whose needs are not being adequately met through local or national strategies at any particular time and those who are destitute, with no statutory entitlement at all.

In summary, a day centre is often:

- The **first** place visited by those who find themselves homeless or in crisis;
- The **last** place which will accept those whose exclusion is entrenched and profound; and,
- The **only** place where those without any recourse to public funds can access any services at all.

## What do we mean by homeless people?

Clearly those who sleep on the streets are homeless people. But homelessness and the threat of homelessness does not just affect people on the streets.

Many in London experience homelessness or the threat of homelessness in other forms:

- Households placed in temporary accommodation by councils;
- People living in night shelters and hostels;
- Hidden homeless people (often staying with friends or relatives) and,
- Those in insecure or unsafe accommodation or on the verge of losing their home.

# 2 The ethos of day centres

There are 55 day centres geographically dispersed across the Capital, which vary in size from large purpose-built facilities to small community-based projects.

Within this larger group, there are a number of professional and strategically important day centres. While the range of facilities varies, positive engagement, needs assessment, casework and care-planning are all key ways in which these day centres work as places of change for their clients.

There is a huge range of issues faced by homeless and vulnerable people which can be addressed in day centres. However, these can be broadly categorised as problems that cause an individual to be homeless and at risk and problems that are directly caused by being homeless.

For both individuals and the community the over-arching mission of day centres is to end homelessness and reduce the harm caused by homelessness.

While each day centre provides a uniquely tailored menu of services, the special features they share are:

- Safe, accessible, welcoming spaces
- Recognition of the complex and wide range of problems facing homeless people
- A combination of facilities which meet primary physical needs, secondary advice services and personal development opportunities
- Acceptance of, and ability to cope with, people excluded from other services
- Optimism, with a focus on development and positive change.

## 3 How day centres work

Day centres are run, for the most part, by voluntary organisations funded by a combination of statutory grants and voluntary donations. They work closely with other statutory and voluntary services and form a crucial part of social welfare provision in London. Joint working with other organisations is a strength of day centres and is a key part of ensuring clients are able to re-connect with both the statutory and local community support they need for sustainable recovery.

Day centres work positively with their clients, in the belief that with the right support everyone has the capacity to change and improve the quality of their life. Crucial to their success has been their ability to develop and sustain positive relationships with some of the most excluded and vulnerable people in the community. Through the work they do and the relationship they develop with their clients, day centres aim to:

- Meet physical, personal and emotional needs and promote good health
- Foster confidence, a positive sense of identity and personal dignity
- Promote lifestyle change through programmes of prevention, integration and reintegration
- Find pathways out of homelessness and achieve sustainable independence, self-sufficiency and meaningful occupation.

They do this by providing:

- Needs assessment and care/self-development packages
- A wide range of specialist advice about those issues which affect people when they are homeless
- Access/referral to temporary shelter or housing
- Outreach and street rescue services
- Education, training and job-search
- Tenancy sustainment support and aftercare
- Emotional and social support
- Basic services such as food, washing facilities and access to medical care.

# 4 Why do day centres matter?

Day centre service providers have a unique, first-hand perspective of how social changes in London affect the most vulnerable in society. They are a barometer for local need, pan-London social change and emerging national issues. Moreover, they are best placed to provide a fast, flexible and professional response to problems as they arise. And they can play an important role in countering stereotypes and common misconceptions of homelessness and vulnerability.

The core of what day centres are about is changing lives and enabling people to reconnect with society. At times they can save lives. Without day centres more people would die prematurely on the streets and more would become entrenched and remain homeless for the remainder of their lives.

For many vulnerable people, day centres act as a conduit to finding and sustaining accommodation. Without them, the community would experience more begging and more homeless people openly living on the streets.

Day centres provide the opportunity for people at a point of crisis to stabilise, and then to be supported appropriately to make positive changes to their lives. Statutory services like hospitals, social services departments and police stations are not necessarily equipped to respond, but if these opportunities are missed, problems do not get solved. The potential for positive change is lost, with significant impact on both the individual and the community.

Day centres provide a professional response to current and emerging needs. Without them there would be a huge gap in service provision with a resulting strain on other services and an increase in social deprivation in London.

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## **The CLG report "More than a roof" states:**

"The term "day centre" is used to describe very different types of projects... what is important is that day services are part of an overall strategy to prevent or alleviate homelessness within local authority areas."

*March 2002*