



The Connection at
St Martins



The Passage

Tackling homelessness – The New York experience

A report from representatives of London organisations
working with the single homeless following a visit to
New York in November 2003

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Tackling Homelessness – The New York Experience

A. Background

Over the last decade there has been considerable interest in the methods and approaches taken by organisations and individuals in New York to tackle the problem of homelessness and associated 'street life' issues; substance misuse, anti-social behaviour, begging and crime. In November 2003 representatives from a number of London-based organisations visited New York and met with a range of key individuals and bodies with responsibility for tackling homelessness related problems. The London contingent was unusual in its range as it included:

- Chief Executives and senior staff from four major London homelessness charities: The Passage, Connection at St Martin's, Broadway and Thames Reach Bondway
- Two senior managers from Westminster City Council
- A representative from the Anti-social Behaviour Unit, based in the Home Office
- The Executive Director of the London Housing Foundation, which funded the visit.

Group members were specifically interested in exploring issues and solutions associated with the problem of single, rather than family, homelessness. This was therefore the focus of the investigation. We set out to answer the following questions:

- 1. Are the activities of voluntary agencies working with the City authorities leading to a demonstrable reduction in rough sleeping in the City?**
- 2. What lessons can be derived from the working relationship between the City authorities and the not-for-profit organisations that seek to reduce homelessness in New York?**
- 3. Is the assertive 'zero tolerance' approach for which New York has become renowned transferable in whole or part to London?**
- 4. What are the lessons that can be passed on to the British Government about how the Bush administration is approaching homelessness as a national problem?**
- 5. How far have the homelessness services in New York addressed the wider issues of social exclusion and quality of life through employment, training and education schemes?**
- 6. What are the funding mechanisms and strategies that sustain homelessness initiatives, with particular reference to business and government sponsorship, private finance and approaches to fundraised income?**
- 7. How successful are building-based services such as day centres in enabling people to avoid rough sleeping and find rapid exit routes from the street?**

**8. How developed and meaningful is user involvement in New York?
Is there evidence that service users can shape and direct
homelessness services?**

The visit proved to be enormously useful and the contacts made with organisations in New York will continue to be developed over the coming months and years.

B. New York and London – a Tale of Two Cities

i. Rough sleeping

Both New York and London, cities with populations of a similar size, face considerable problems linked to rough sleeping – a very visible and politically sensitive form of homelessness. In central London the numbers sleeping out on any one night range from 200 – 300, a figure that has been gradually falling since the early 1990s. Organisations working with rough sleepers undertake regular street counts and whilst there remains some debate about the accuracy of the figures and the number of people who may be missed through counts, there is general consensus that the number of rough sleepers has been falling.

The New York authorities have only recently measured the numbers of rough sleepers in the City through a centrally organised street count. The only count so far undertaken, in February 2003, found 1,780 people sleeping rough in Manhattan (one of New York's five boroughs), excluding the subways. New York agencies we spoke to during the visit were convinced that the amount of rough sleeping had decreased from the early 1990s throughout the decade and there was a general acceptance that the 'zero tolerance' approach adopted by the Guiliani administration had reduced the level of crime in central Manhattan and made the city feel safer. There was less consensus on whether the reduction in rough sleeping in central Manhattan was a result of an actual reduction in numbers across the whole of the city or if it represented a displacement of rough sleepers from the centre to outlying areas. What did seem certain was that the large congregations of rough sleepers in encampments that had previously existed were now no longer evident.

It was also apparent that, according to most of the key New York representatives, the numbers of homeless people on the street had begun to rise again in the last few years.¹ Whatever the case, it is clear from the rough sleeping figures that the scale of the problem in New York is significantly greater than in London.

The profile of rough sleepers in New York compared to London is broadly the same in terms of age and gender, with the majority of rough sleepers in both cities being in the 21-55 age range and approximately 85% being male. In

¹ The Coalition for the Homeless, the primary advocacy organisation for homeless people in New York claim that 'by the winter of 2002-03 there were more single homeless adults in New York than at any time since [1990]' The Coalition regards the recent increase in street homelessness to be 'largely a result of cutbacks in supportive housing in the second half of the decade' [1990s]. (A History of Modern Homelessness in New York City – www.coalitionforthehomeless.org)

New York however the ethnic profile is vastly different than in London, with over 80% of rough sleepers being from ethnic minority groups, particularly black and Hispanic. In London the rough sleeping population remains predominantly white, with fewer than 10% of rough sleepers being from ethnic minority groups.

ii. Shelter population

Both London and New York have large hostel populations. In London there are over 3,000 central London 'direct access' hostel bed-spaces available for homeless single people and many more supported housing projects. In New York the total size of the shelter population is 38,400. 8,500 of these are single adults, 16,600 children and 13,300 adult family members. The biggest difference is in the quality of the accommodation on offer. In New York there is a significant range between some good quality shelters, which in the last few years have been managed by the not-for-profit sector, and the large dormitory-style shelters managed by the City authorities. The latter are of a size (up to 800 bed-spaces) and quality that is now considered unacceptably poor in London, where a 70-bed hostel is viewed as large. This has created a two-tier system with some of the most chaotic and vulnerable homeless men and women remaining stuck in the institutionalised shelters. Entry into the shelter system is via massive intake shelters from which some residents are selected for the smaller scale and more humane shelters that are managed by the not-for-profit sector. When senior staff at the Department of Homeless Services, which oversees the shelter system, were asked which aspect of the system they would like changed, they answered that the intake process, inflexible and selective in its nature, would be their first choice.

iii. Political commitment to reduce homelessness

In both New York and London there persists a strong political commitment to reducing homelessness, as there is across both countries. In New York there is a unique legal imperative placed on the New York authorities. A high profile legal duel that was completed 1981 – *Callahan versus Carey*, placed on the New York authorities the duty to ensure that anyone in New York who is homeless is provided with shelter. The City authority's response to this is to provide (they would argue from necessity) a very basic level of shelter. The Giuliani administration launched a legal challenge to the open-ended responsibility to provide every homeless person with shelter, regardless of his or her behaviour or level of co-operation. This culminated in a 2000 State Supreme Court ruling which prevented the City from implementing the 'State Shelter Termination Regulation' which would have given powers to evict from shelters families and individuals who persistently failed to comply with administrative rules and social services plans. The Bloomberg administration has not given up hope of achieving what it would regard as greater flexibility in its management of homelessness services and has pursued an appeal of the 2000 decision.

In our conversations with The Department of Homeless Services it was clear that officials are of the view that the duty to provide shelter, one that is not

shared by other cities across the United States, encourages those responsible for the prisons and mental hospitals to discharge men and women inappropriately into the shelter system. Our impression was that the fear of litigation is such that experimentation by the statutory authorities with new ways of working is rare in the current climate. In simple terms the fear of costly and lengthy legal battles appears to be stifling creativity. The authorities feel hidebound by the system and the not-for-profit sector are extremely reluctant to trade away the 'right to shelter' in order to create greater flexibility and momentum in return. Their fear is that a safety net of this kind, inadequate though it may be, is worth preserving amidst the unpredictability of changing political priorities.

iv. Leadership from central government

The London visitors had the opportunity to meet with Philip Mangano, appointed by President Bush to oversee a drive to reduce rough sleeping across the United States. Mr Mangano's approach is based on a compelling mix of admonition and persuasion and he had made good progress in encouraging a number of major cities to produce a 10-year plan to reduce rough sleeping. In Philadelphia he was able to provide an example of a major city which has, over a four year period, successfully reduced the number of individuals forced to sleep rough by over 75% through clear leadership from the City Mayor and the concentration of significant powers around a senior figure who can direct resources across the city's departments to achieve this objective.

It was evident that the lack of affordable housing was an important contributor to the growth of homelessness in New York through the 1980s yet, in our conversations with most of the key individuals, supply side considerations did not appear to have a great emphasis. As the recent Barker report illustrates, this is also a major issue in this country.

v. Not-for-profit agencies as key players

As in London, the not-for-profit (voluntary) sector is instrumental in delivering much of the city's homelessness programme and a number of the shelters formerly managed by the city authorities are now the responsibility of not-for-profit organisations such as Project Renewal and Care for the Homeless. The quality of this accommodation is immeasurably better than in the large city-managed shelters, though often poor in comparison with London standards, with very little single-room accommodation.

There are aspects of the services managed by the not-for-profit organisations which are outstanding. For example:

- Common Ground manage the Times Square Hotel in central Manhattan, a former flophouse which is now a vibrant and attractive place to live, with a mixed group of tenants that includes former homeless and employed people living on low incomes. The non-institutional feel of the building, the strong corporate links offering work

opportunities and expectations that tenants should seek and maintain employment distinguishes this (and other projects managed by Common Ground) as the type of project where former homeless people can live with dignity.

- The Bowery Residents Committee routinely offers the opportunity for service users with substance misuse problems to access drug and alcohol detoxification and rehabilitation within a 24-hour time frame. Although access to substance misuse treatment in London is becoming easier and quicker, London agencies are not yet able to achieve this speed of access for service users.
- The Fortune Academy, which provides services and accommodation for men and women leaving prison or the City-run shelters is strongly committed to offering service users employment with the organisation as part of the overall service package that it provides. A third of staff are former service users, providing inspiration and powerful role models for new service users. Such a model is extremely rare amongst homelessness agencies in London.
- Fountain House provide building-based services for people with mental health problems, many of whom have suffered from homelessness. The clubhouse model on which it operates is characterised by being a user-owned service, managed and directed by the service users themselves. The organisation has effective links with a range of corporate supporters who provide work placements, training and employment for the clubhouse users.

vi. Partnerships

The alliance of organisations seeking to reduce homelessness in New York closely resembles the London partnership, though the strength and maturity of the different relationships varies. Apart from the obvious links between the City authorities and the not-for-profit sector, New York homelessness organisations working on the street with rough sleepers often work closely with the police. As part of the visit we took the opportunity to accompany a team on their street work shift. The team comprised a not-for-profit staff member and two New York City policemen. The working relationship was cordial and productive, although other not-for-profit organisations preferred a more distant relationship with the police. In London, the front-line agencies working with rough sleepers also operate closely with the police within a defined set of protocols around information sharing.

In both London and New York, support from the corporate sector is seen as highly important and a recognition that homelessness is 'everyone's problem'. In New York the financial support is more tangible and the inter-relationship between the corporates and not-for-profit organisations operates in some cases on a level of 'joint branding'.

Links between different not-for-profit organisations in New York appear to be less well defined and not as comprehensive as those in London, where too the range of the partnership is greater. Colleagues in New York seemed

slightly mystified that the group visiting from London should include not only not-for-profit members but local and central government representatives also.

Some of the street teams working in central Manhattan had only the most cursory contact with each other, did not routinely share information on mutual clients and were therefore at risk of duplicating work. In comparison, street teams in London have carefully defined geographical areas to prevent duplication and relatively sophisticated means of sharing information, based around a client contact database to which they all have access. This approach has been strongly encouraged and supported by the Homelessness Directorate and a central government role in setting out expectations in this area has clearly been beneficial in London.

vii Care versus enforcement

The balance between offering care and enforcement in a way that is reasonable and likely to achieve the desired outcome of assisting people to move off the streets is a key issue in New York, as it is in London. Those people living on the street are often perceived to be connected with crime, and in some cases the perception is reality. In New York the balance between an effective policy of combining care and enforcement is most clearly seen in the Community Courts situated through the City, including in Midtown and Harlem. The Community Courts pride themselves as being embedded in local communities to which they are both responsive and accountable. A Community Condition Panel comprising local community representatives acts as the eyes and ears of the court, commenting and offering views on aspects of community life, as they relate to the criminal justice system, that concern them.

The courts are based on the concept that there is no such thing as a victimless crime and that even low level crime – graffiti, travelling without paying on the subway, begging – all have a negative impact on the community. The offender appearing before the Community Court - staggeringly informal and noisy places in comparison with their London counterparts - is usually able to select to undertake community service or a drug treatment option instead of a prison sentence and, if the proceedings we witnessed are standard, normally do.

There however remained an impression that some of the effective co-operation that existed during the Giuliani era, specifically between the not-for-profit street outreach teams and the police to achieve the correct balance between care and enforcement has dissipated, emphasising the need for a continuous investment in co-ordination and partnership structures.

C. Summary

New York and London are cities of a comparable size, striving to deal with many of the same problems linked to rough sleeping, general homelessness and street life issues (what is termed in New York 'quality of life'). Exchanges between leading representatives of government and the not-for-profit sector

are of immeasurable benefit, none more so than the visit funded by the London Housing Foundation.

Our key findings are:

1. New York has a growing homelessness problem and the unique responsibility that requires the City to provide shelter for an individual presenting as homeless has fed the growth in the size of the shelter population and, seemingly, created a disincentive for the City authorities to explore new ways of responding to this problem.
2. New York has only recently started to measure the size of its rough sleeping problem through street counts. The figure of 1,780 (for Manhattan alone) indicates a far greater problem than that faced in London, though we cannot afford to be complacent as the number of people sleeping rough is reducing more slowly in the capital than in the rest of Britain and there are considerable fluctuations in the central London figure. Philadelphia provides a powerful example of how a focused, centralised approach to tackling rough sleeping with clear leadership can make a startling impact on numbers.
3. The range of partnerships in New York, as in London, is impressive. There is notable support provided by the corporate sector and clear evidence of community involvement, particularly in the operation of community courts. Not-for-profit organisations in New York do not have the collaborative working arrangements, particularly amongst the street teams, with which we are familiar in London.
4. Whilst some New York services are basic and of poor standard, particularly the large City-managed shelters, there are a range of innovative projects impressive in structure, ambience and in the manner in which service users can make an impact on service delivery.
5. The balance between care and enforcement is an important aspect of the New York approach. The best example of how the approach can succeed is illustrated through the Community Courts.
6. Whilst accommodation in New York is generally of a poorer standard than that offered to homeless people in London, access to drug and alcohol treatment programmes is easier and quicker.
7. As in London, the growth in street homelessness in New York can be linked directly, though by no means solely, to a decline in the availability of low-cost accommodation. Whilst solving homelessness certainly requires solutions that are 'more than a roof', without addressing the need for increases in the availability of affordable accommodation for people on the lowest incomes it is hard to envisage the long-term resolution of homelessness.
8. In both countries there remains a political commitment from both central and regional/local government to tackle rough sleeping which continues to be seen as damaging to human life and politically embarrassing.

