



Sitra Response to Discussion Paper, Rough Sleeping 10 years on: From the streets to independent living and opportunity

Sitra is a voluntary agency and registered charity offering training, consultancy and advice on issues connected with the provision of supported housing and care. As an umbrella membership organisation, we have around 900 members who are practitioners in the field of housing with care and support, including housing associations and other charitable bodies. We are recognised and consulted by Government departments, including the Communities and Local Government department and other bodies such as the Housing Corporation, as representatives of providers of supported housing.

We welcome the opportunity to comment on the discussion as we responded on the original consultation in 1998. As specialists in the field of housing care and support, we hope our comments will identify where providers in this sector can contribute to the Governments policy drivers on rough sleeping.

General points

Sitra would like to acknowledge the significant progress of the Government in tackling the visible forms of homelessness. We are confident that the move from solely reactive services to a holistic approach has increased the likelihood of permanent solutions for rough sleepers. Providers have been particular adept at acquiring skills in identifying the aspirations of this client group, and are able to put in place a package of support that encompasses life skills, social networking, and access to housing, health, social care training, education and employment. The contribution of supported housing providers to the Governments success in this area of work should not be underestimated.

Sitra would also like to know how the Government is consulting or proposing to consult current and former rough sleepers on the strategy. We believe that it is only through service users own articulation of their needs and aspirations, plus their views on the services they are currently receiving can enable the Government to reach its targets in this area.

Have we identified the right issues for the updated strategy to address, and which are the most important?

Sitra believes that the issues to address must consider the continued use of street counts. The paper recognises the need for robust data on the number of rough sleepers, which also enables Government to monitor the progress made by former rough sleepers. Sitra continues to be concerned about the use of street counts to measure the numbers of those rough sleeping. Whilst acknowledging that utilising the current methodology has enabled the Government to monitor trends and changes in rough sleeping, we believe that street counting does not provide the sophisticated data the Government needs to reach its ambitious targets. The lack of quality information is borne out by the characteristics identified from the current methodology, that those rough sleeping are primarily white, male between the ages of 25 – 45 years. We suggest that

those from a BME background, women, older and younger people are less likely to be identified in street counts, as they are more vulnerable thus likely to be less visible at night in order to be less exposed to harm. Anecdotally we have heard of inconsistencies between Local Authorities criteria for counting people, some local authorities not registering those who do not appear to be physically asleep, or those who are not visible under piles of clothing or bedding. In some cases those conducting the counts have no experience of working with rough sleepers and/or a lack of awareness of the geographical area and where rough sleeping may be taking place. Ideally we would like to see a different methodology of assessing the level of rough sleeping that actively engages those services who work with street homeless, however if street counts are going to continue the Government should ensure that Local Authorities use common criteria and experienced staff.

Following on from this issue is the need for the Government to identify those who represent hidden homeless, one danger being that those who are currently hidden become visible at a later date. This will compromise the Government's ambitious target of getting rough sleeping as close to zero as possible. In our response to the Social Exclusion Unit in 1998 we wrote

it should be recognised that rough sleeping is only the most extreme manifestation of the problem of homelessness, and that for every rough sleeper there are several other hidden homeless people who are sleeping on friends' floors or living in insecure accommodation of one kind or another. These hidden homeless are also socially excluded and policies that government develops to tackle rough sleeping should address the needs of this group as well. Otherwise, many of them will simply take the place of the rough sleepers who have been moved off the streets.

Sitra recognise that through the Supporting People programme the needs of those who are living in insecure accommodation are being successfully addressed. However the numbers of hidden homeless need to be measured, firstly to identify the scale of the problem, secondly to identify what interventions are effective, and lastly to highlight what would happen if these valuable preventative services were not to exist.

Sitra is concerned that the aim of the strategy is to drive rough sleeping down to as close to zero as possible. We congratulate the Government in wanting to set ambitious targets to address the needs of rough sleepers, especially as this programme delivers services to those who are most vulnerable and have a wide range of complex and co-occurring needs. There is a danger however of ignoring the individual needs of service users in an effort to reach this target making inappropriate referrals into accommodation based services. What we believe is more useful is the references in the paper to the wider action plan, ensuring rough sleepers are able to complete the journey from the streets and into independent living. With this in mind we would like to recommend that the strategy aims are outcomes focussed, for example, all rough sleepers will be known to statutory or voluntary organisations, and be in receipt of a level of support to enable them to access and maintain suitable accommodation.

What new actions would have the biggest impact in delivering the proposed aims of the updated strategy?

As well as action by Government, what can other partners in the statutory, voluntary and private sectors contribute to the updated strategy?

For ease of reading Sitra has answered the two questions together as we feel that in articulating new actions we could also look at partners' contribution.

Sitra believes that that the Supporting People programme has enabled providers to realise the Governments target of reducing rough sleeping. The introduction of Local Area Agreements in April 2009 is going to mean changes for support providers. Whilst recognising the opportunities that Local Area agreements can contribute to joint commissioning, particularly for a client group that has often complex and co-occurring needs, LAA also present some challenges to providers of support services for this client group. Providers are concerned that the needs of vulnerable but often less desirable groups may be overlooked at a local level, especially in a climate of limited resources.

Providers are awaiting the publication of the prioritised national indicators adopted for their area. We understand there are no specific indicators for homelessness and as a second tier organisation we anticipate continuing to provide capacity building work in this area, including supporting providers to identify where their work contributes to the indicators adopted by Local Authorities. We are hoping that the national indicators on Supporting People NI141 and 142 will be adopted by the majority of Local Authorities, thereby protecting the valuable preventative work funded by the programme. Those who work with rough sleeping clients groups are also apprehensive that local area agreements are not the right vehicle to commission services for groups that are geographically mobile. Multi-area agreements are however specifically designed to meet needs across local boundaries, and may offer a route to ensure that it is not just local priorities that are considered. We hope that Local Authorities will be committed to the importance of contributing to these agreements.

Sitra is pleased that the discussion paper has identified the importance of Local Authority Homelessness Strategies including measures to tackle homelessness amongst single people. We are however surprised that Homelessness Strategies and guidance continue not expect Local Authorities to address the specific needs of rough sleepers or the migrant population. Given the past success of reducing the numbers of rough sleepers has required a very focussed and targeted approach; we would expect that the updated rough sleepers strategy would identify the importance of Homelessness Strategies including the needs of rough sleepers. Preventing and tackling street homeless and identified needs of those groups such as migrants should be identified in the guidance to reviewing Homeless Strategies with the expectation that the strategy will links in to the results of the Adults facing Chronic Exclusion pilots, Socially Excluded Adults Public Service Agreement.

The role of the Housing Option interview conducted by Local Authorities is critical in preventing street homelessness particularly of those who are migrants with no recourse to public funding. Sitra are surprised that no guidance exists to enable staff conducting the interview to recognise an individuals potential for rough sleeping and prevent it. We believe that the development of such guidance is sorely needed, and once guidance is in place that central Government could encourage its use in the statutory guidance on homelessness for Local Authorities.

In order to deliver the strategy there needs to be a throughput of service users from crisis and direct access housing into more permanent housing solutions. We appreciate that the Government are seeking to address the lack of settled homes particularly in the South East but those who are rough sleeping are not eligible for social housing. Local Authorities move to Choice Based Letting we see as providing a real opportunity for rough sleepers to access permanent housing solutions.

The use of the private sector has often been promoted by Government as a settled home for those in housing need. We suggest that the development of the strategy needs to consider the effect of the introduction of the local housing allowance on those from a rough sleeping background. Anecdotally providers have struggled to place those who are vulnerable to rough sleeping in private accommodation given their complex needs. The problems of securing accommodation will be increased given landlords in area of housing demand are charging a minimum of the local housing allowance and more commonly more. Those who are vulnerable are also placed in a challenging position by receiving their rent direct, given the temptations to utilise this resource in areas other than rent payment.

Do you have sources of evidence or examples of good practice that it would be helpful for us to draw on?

Being a second tier organisation Sitra is not able to directly comment on this question. We have disseminated the issues in this discussion paper to our members through our monthly bulletin and urged members to contribute to the dialogue. We would however like to make the following suggestions based on anecdotal evidence we have received from members.

Any models to bring in the most entrenched group of rough sleepers should take into account this groups aspirations and needs. It is our understanding that those individuals continue to rough sleep as current provision does not meet their need. Often entrenched rough sleepers feel unable to meet or maintain the obligations of existing provision i.e. the responsibilities of the occupancy agreement, 'house rules' and the methodology of support provision. One suggestion is having very basic housing provision 'pods' dispersed through the city centre similar to automatic toilet provision. The provision would contain a bed, toilet washing facilities, individuals could collect a key from a designated office which would enable staff to engage with individuals on a basic level to establish a relationship fundamental to further work. This would also enable pets to be accommodated as the provision would not be shared. The issue of pets must be carefully considered; a number of those rough sleeping have close and valuable relationships with their pets however it is difficult to accommodate pets in current provision.

Regarding move-on of those in supported housing and avoiding 'silt up' Sitra would like to suggest that the Government contact Move-on Alternatives Project which comprises the North London Boroughs. Other good practice includes Local Authorities who have increased the currency for Choice Based Letting of those who are in supported accommodation or homeless and have systems to support those who are more vulnerable to understand this system. Sitra believe it is particularly important to continue to invest in services for those who are homeless and those who are rough sleeping. There needs to be continued research into what interventions work with individuals and with the client group if the strategy is going to be successful in reaching the Governments targets.