

Written evidence submitted by Dr David Christie (TH0020)

Written Evidence to Inquiry: Tackling Homelessness

Evidence derived from my doctoral thesis: 'A 'Hand-up, not a Handout': New Labour and Street Homelessness 1997-2010', completed at the University of Birmingham in March 2024. I am a research fellow at the University of Birmingham, College of Arts and Law, History department. Prior to returning to academia I had ten years of experience in running projects for single homeless people in London and Bristol from 1986-1996. The research was grounded in the oral testimonies of 90 individuals who designed and delivered New Labour's homelessness policies, and an extensive use of extant literature from the period. The research provides the most comprehensive analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of New Labour's homelessness policies to date.

Summary and Key Findings

1. New Labour was highly successful in reducing the numbers of rough sleepers and in enabling resettled homeless people to permanently escape from the streets. New Labour's approach has direct relevance to contemporary homeless policy making.
2. The issue of homelessness must be given a high priority by government, and strong Prime Ministerial support is vital.
3. The creation of cross-cutting government bodies is essential to address homelessness holistically, and these bodies must be empowered with sufficient authority and resources to achieve their aims.
4. 'Entrenched' rough sleepers must be prioritised and working practices and provision orientated to address their needs.
5. Long-term solutions must address more than merely accommodation. Forms of support that address complex needs, issues of self-esteem and allow the engagement and empowerment of homeless people are not add-ons, but vital to ensure successful resettlement away from the streets. This requires a substantial input of funds, which should be directed toward increasing the capacity and skill-base of the voluntary homeless sector, administered via local government, and ring-fenced.
6. An emphasis on homeless prevention is vital, and funding should be ring-fenced for active prevention programmes not diverted to subsidise temporary accommodation.

Reasons for New Labour's success

1. Governmental prioritisation

Labour gave the issue of rough sleeping a high priority and it's policies were given strong support directly from the Prime Minister. According to Moira Wallace (Director Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) 1997-2002) and Louise Casey (Director Rough Sleepers Unit (RSU) 1999-2003), strong Prime Ministerial advocacy was a vital factor in ensuring the necessary co-operation of governmental departments to commit to working together to address homelessness.

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Louise Casey was given the designation of 'Homelessness Tsar', garnering a great deal of public and press attention and making her a national figure. This publicity was significant in raising the profile of the issue and maintaining its status as a government priority.

Labour risked setting a clear, challenging, but achievable target for reducing rough sleeping (reduction by two-thirds over three years). Rather than 'seeking to end rough sleeping' which, given the numerous 'push' factors that create street homelessness is almost impossible to achieve – having a measurable target kept the government and the RSU focussed and very publicly accountable for achieving the target.

2. Creation and empowerment of 'cross-cutting' government units.

Labour's understanding that rough sleeping is an archetypal 'wicked problem' - the responsibility of many different governmental departments but central to none - and the understanding that therefore any solution to rough sleeping required a joined-up approach across government were both vital.

To overcome the traditional 'siloed' working practice of government departments, Labour utilised novel forms of 'government by unit', creating 'cross-cutting' bodies specifically designed to address the issue holistically, and these were constructed and positioned in such a way to be able to achieve their aims. The Social Exclusion Unit was afforded the necessary position at the heart of government by its location within the Cabinet Office, and given sufficient weight to achieve its aims by reporting directly to the Prime Minister. The Rough Sleepers Unit was formed as a quasi-independent body within the MHCLG and afforded effective leverage by securing the direct support of the Prime Ministerial. Equivalent bodies should be created and afforded the same centrality and Prime Ministerial support.

The key bodies responsible for Labour's success were the RSU and its successor, the Homelessness Directorate (from 2003). They were made effective by a number of factors: 1. Charismatic and effective leadership. 2. The affording of leadership positions to individuals with extensive experience in the homelessness sector and the recruitment of civil servants who were committed to achieving change and knew how to navigate Whitehall 3. The adoption of radical forms of working practice that were non-hierarchical, bottom-up and hands on. The active participation of RSU members in street work, built strong relationships with the homelessness sector and enabled a form of 'action research', where insights could be fed directly back into policy-making.

3. Adoption of working practices designed to address 'entrenched' rough sleepers

A key factor in the RSU's success was the focus on 'entrenched rough sleepers' - those who had been on the street for a long time. This should be repeated to address the current crisis. Under New Labour this consisted of a significant re-configuration of the working practices of the voluntary homeless sector: the use of 'assertive outreach'; new mandates for the Contact and Assessment (outreach) teams to focus on long-term rough sleepers; the recruitment of specialist mental health and substance misuse workers into both outreach

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teams and hostels; the reduction in barriers to entering hostels for people exhibiting challenging behaviour, and the development of accommodation offering higher levels of support. These working practices should be replicated and the necessary funds made available. More controversially, measures such as co-working with law-enforcement, street safety teams, and taking steps to address 'problematic street culture' (e.g. the use of ASBOs), were considered highly effective by many practitioners. These were often considered as necessary to 'disrupt' patterns of entrenched homelessness and reduce 'pull' factors that drew people back into street life. It is vital, however, that such methods, as under New Labour, must not be merely punitive, but employed in conjunction with realisable opportunities to access appropriate accommodation and support.

3. A focus on resettlement and rehabilitation in order to provide long-term solutions to street homelessness.

New Labour recognised that the provision of accommodation, either temporary or permanent, was insufficient to ensure long-term resettlement away from the streets. Most rough sleepers have experienced forms of repeated trauma, suffer from low self-esteem, have weak or non-existent support networks, and many have complex support needs. The lack of any structure, purpose or any sense of control over their lives often leads to tenancy breakdown and the return to the streets of resettled homeless people.

New Labour employed a range of measures to address these issues, all of which could be re-employed and expanded upon.

3a. Investment in specialist and supported housing and forms of tenancy (floating) support including a 'Housing First' approach.

3b. Investment in, and improving the access to, mental health and substance misuse services for homeless people.

3c. Encouraging forms of user-engagement/empowerment/co-production – partnership working with lived experience grassroots groups such as Groundswell.

3d. An emphasis on providing means for homeless people to engage with 'meaningful activity', education and training and facilitating a return to paid employment.

3.e Improving the physical fabric of homeless hostels to create bright and welcoming environments, and making hostels 'Places of Change' by providing a range of activities and opportunities rather than as sinks to 'warehouse' homeless people.

3f. Facilitating the adoption by homeless service providers of new and improved forms of working practice – 'trauma informed care' and the formation of 'Psychologically informed Environments' (PIEs).

These measures require the employment of **significant resources** to expand the capacity and develop the skills of the voluntary homeless sector. These skills are still extant in the more developed parts of the voluntary homeless sector and could easily be revitalised and built upon. New Labour achieved this, primarily, by the substantial input of funds through

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the Supporting People (SP) programme. Administered by local authority commissioners, it was a vital component of SP that the central government funding was 'ring-fenced' to be only utilised for the provision of services. When the ring-fence was removed in 2008 the funding was dissipated into the wider council budget and many services were downgraded or lost. Future funding of this sort must be ring-fenced.

SP was highly effective but flawed, it built on pre-existing provision rather than a comprehensive audit of need, there were problems in non-unitary authorities, some poor-quality commissioning, and an unnecessary requirement to re-tender for contracts every three years. These and other problems with the commissioning and disbursement of SP funds are, however, well documented and solutions for many have already been explored (there is insufficient space to delineate these here).

4. Homelessness Prevention

Prevention is infinitely preferable to a crisis response. Under the Homelessness Act 2002 New Labour introduced a duty on local authorities to produce 'local homeless strategies' and the first duty to provide homelessness prevention services. This transformed the relationship of local authority housing departments toward single homeless people and a 'housing options' approach proved highly effective in preventing the generation of homelessness. These measures have subsequently been built upon by the Homelessness Reduction Act, but much of the money for homeless prevention has been diverted away into funding temporary accommodation. Any future funding for homeless prevention should be tightly ring-fenced.

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