How We Did The Research

A small group of members of the homeless forum took responsibility for designing and carrying out this consultation. We decided to use a focus group method, where small groups of people who shared a similar experience of homelessness could talk in depth about their lives and the way they used local services. Each group was led by a facilitator using a common but flexible topic guide to structure the discussion, assisted by a note taker who recorded the conversation. Almost all the attendees attended a special briefing/training session to plan and practice.

The seven groups that gathered together covered experiences of rough sleepers, sex workers, hostel residents, young homeless, women escaping domestic violence, families and drop ins. Between them they were able to offer feedback on a range of services from soup kitchens and drop ins, to housing advice, supported tenancies, health services, alcohol and drugs counselling and the police and on both statutory and voluntary and religious organisations.

Ideas For Improvements

(comments from participants in focus groups)

More homes available for people with children, conditions of property to be improved before moving in.

Temporary homes available for people to go into while waiting for permanent accommodation, rather than hotels.

Phone numbers that can be called from mobiles for free.

More personal warmth they respond well and appreciate it, especially if it leads to a positive change in their situation.

Facilities for the weekend ... you do not stop being homeless over the weekend.

Temporary tenancies, rather than hostels.

There should be more council/housing association properties available.

There’s plenty of closed pubs that could bed people.

Getting a place together for the homeless, like an action plan of what everyone is going to do.

Find somewhere to do... to keep us off the drink... maybe we need voluntary that we could use.

Blankets for the homeless, hats and gloves, somewhere to be opened up for people to stay.

We felt like we were treated as rubbish, no customer service, not kept informed, too long waiting for repairs.

Mick Activities... every homeless place they’ve got ping pong and pool and maybe a pack of cards... maybe it would keep them in a place for a bit longer and away from drugs or drink.

Ronny... women... you need women there.

Mick Woman... is the ruin of every man

Barry... I said “swimming!”

Barry... I don’t go to any of them (official organisations) because they look down at you. The difference today was when the lads came down the street they talked to person to person so I listened (Rough Sleeper)

Why this Report?

During the autumn of 2008 Preston Homeless Forum with the support of Preston City Council organised a consultation process with people who are, or had recently been, homeless in the city.

The main aim was to allow homeless people themselves to have a voice and to tell us about their experiences. In particular we were looking for feedback and comments about how the range of services in the city are performing.

Why this Report?

We hope that by getting these views, and publishing them widely through this report, that the various agencies seek to serve people who are homeless will rise to the challenge of improving their services.

What Can be Done? Our recommendations.

Homelessness is not a single or simple problem that can be solved simply by finding a property where they can live. There are also hard questions to ask of services or responses that simply allow people to survive on the streets rather than return to the normalities to which they have become accustomed.

There are too many things we would all like to be able to do but which are impossible under current legislation, policy frameworks and resource limitations. We’d all like to make much more affordable housing available, and provide all the support that people need, but we live in a far from perfect world.

However there are a couple of things that come out clearly where services could be improved at relatively little cost.

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What Can be Done? Our recommendations.

The first is information sharing and effective partnership working so that homeless people are not lost in a bewildering jungle of services and agencies. The idea of a one stop service for homeless people where housing, health, benefits, emergency support etc can be addressed at a single point, perhaps using a single key “assertive outreach” worker or personal mentor, does seem worthwhile of further investigation.

Finally, communication standards could be improved to make more frequent and meaningful contact with homeless people, and ensuring they have good up to date information on the progress of their case. Consultation with service users has proved valuable for this report and should be continually developed.

The second is the need for a human and personal approach to people, treating them as a valuable and whole person with empathy, care and warmth. All staff can make an effort and all organisations can set expectations for interaction with homeless people, if necessary by a customer service policy and appropriate training.

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Why this Report?

We hope that by getting these views, and publishing them widely through this report, that the various agencies seek to serve people who are homeless will rise to the challenge of improving their services.

We hope to encourage the groups making up the Preston Homeless Forum to work more closely together in order to make a real difference in the lives of homeless people in our city.
Complex Needs

Many of the people we spoke were not simply homeless or roofless. Rather they were excluded from mainstream society by a complex range of overlapping problems, which might include:

- relationship breakdown
- poverty and debt
- worklessness
- low education and skills
- illness or bereavement
- alcohol or drug addiction
- mental health problems
- repeat offending behaviour
- discharge from care or institutional life

Life On Benefits is Tight

Basic support for someone who is on their own, workless and roofless hardly supplies a survival income. The form filling and bureaucracy seem impenetrable, and there are numerous Catch 22 situations. On top of this come delays, mistakes and stoppages for breaking rules or to repay earlier debts. Those who have been housed often complained of having benefit delays. I’m not getting anything, benefits. I’m not signed on for anything. They are trying to get my benefits sorted out. My money goes into some other body’s account. I need to get the money that’s going into their account.

They try to claim and it takes weeks to sort it out. How can you live on crisis loans? You try to claim and it takes weeks to sort it out. How can you live on crisis loans? How can you live on crisis loans? How can you live on crisis loans?

They do police checks now, but that takes time. They have lists of people who are not suitable. As well as it takes a long time to sort the forms out, they need your birth certificate, they need ID. How can you have ID when you are on the streets and you’ve got nothing.

Some of the Rough Sleepers in particular expressed a strong preference for freedom and informality rather than personal liberty as well as to give or deny housing opportunities. So caution in approaching them is understandable. They give you a form to fill in, but they need your birth certificate, they need ID, so it’s pointless doing the same thing twice.

Rules and Regulations

Some of the Rough Sleepers in particular expressed a strong preference for freedoms and informality rather than regulations and an externally structured context. Indeed it may be that the contrast between “chaotic” lifestyles and the way most agencies have to operate is a factor which makes engaging with people like this so problematic. There is of course a power differential to be taken into account here. Statutory agencies in particular may have the power to take away or reduce income, one even personal liberty as well as to give or deny housing opportunities. So caution in approaching them is understandable.

Fewer Services for Some Groups of Homeless People

This issue of females not being able to access hostels other than the Women’s Refuge for those facing domestic violence, was raised by a number of individuals including a female rough sleeper.

Older single homeless people in particular find it unfair that they can access less help than under 25s.

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