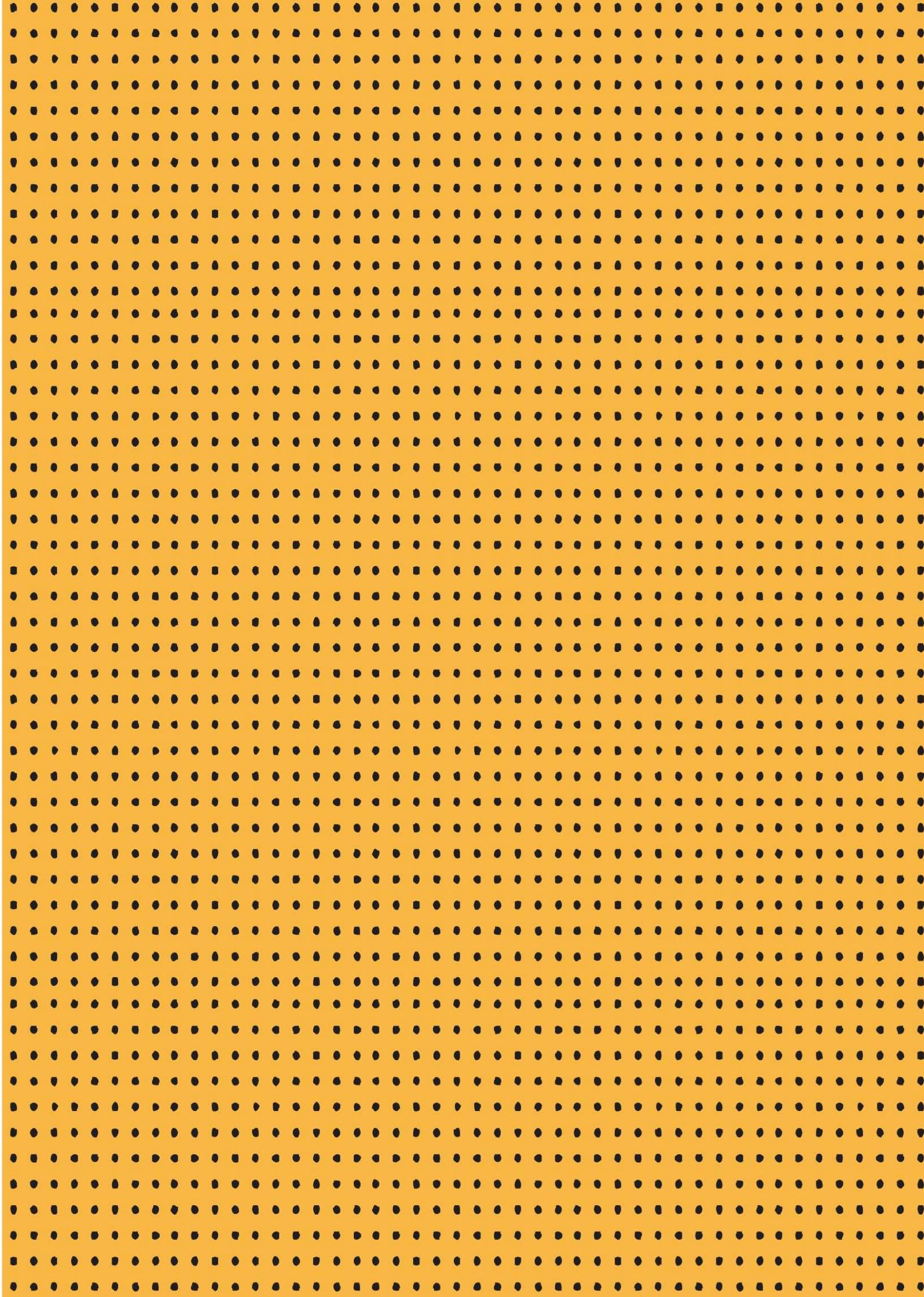


An End to Street Homelessness?

A Peer-led Research Project for the
Hammersmith & Fulham Commission on
Rough Sleeping

Groundswell

Out of homelessness



Executive Summary

Groundswell conducted research with over 100 people who had slept rough in Hammersmith & Fulham in the last year. The current reality for rough sleepers in the borough is stark.

- Not one single individual that we spoke to wanted to have slept rough.
- The current support being offered, despite consuming a lot of resources is entirely inadequate.
- Only two individuals that we spoke to wanted to live in a homeless hostel. In fact, in two separate focus groups the consensus was that **people would prefer to be in prison rather than in a hostel!**
- People did ask for help but the right support was not forthcoming - 66% of participants sought help from a Homeless Person's Unit but still ended up rough sleeping.
- The formal societal safety net of the welfare benefits was in fact perpetuating homelessness and in some cases being the primary trigger.

We hope that this report will offer you the information and the inspiration to radically re-examine, reframe and reimagine how you can support your most vulnerable citizens.

With the same resources spent in a different way and with brave decision making, this Commission gives you a real opportunity to rethink how Hammersmith & Fulham tackles homelessness. Preventing people from rough sleeping in the first place, and quickly housing those who do end up rough sleeping, will dramatically reduce the support needs that people have and therefore reduce the amount of resources poured into mopping up the problems caused by homelessness. Better prevention and support will ultimately save you money and also enable you to gain from the contribution that formerly homeless people have to offer – which will benefit all the residents of Hammersmith and Fulham.

We recommend that you seriously consider the following:

1. **Close Hostels.** Consider how the resources spent on hostels could be used more effectively, potentially embracing a housing first model of accommodation.
2. **Welcome People to Housing Options.** Understand what a great opportunity you have already in place where people present directly to you when they are in significant need. Giving support rather than turning people away will result in significant saving down the line.
3. **Coordinate Support.** Ensure that day centres and outreach are always available to people. Offering support when people are in need prevents issues worsening.
4. **Transform Benefits and Create Opportunities.** The Job Centre is a statutory service that could play an enormously positive role in moving people on. Currently it produces and exacerbates homelessness. Creating more volunteering, training and employment opportunities specifically for people who are homeless will help turn people's lives around and support people to make a contribution - for the benefit of all.

Key Findings

- 1. Complex Needs Are Not Being Met.** Preventing rough sleeping in Hammersmith & Fulham requires a multifaceted response to the needs of rough sleepers and those at risk. However funding cuts and ‘gate keeping’ means these needs are not being addressed.

 - 1.1. For many participants their history of homelessness was complex and they already had extensive support before their current experience of homelessness.** 42% had been in prison; 40% reported physical health issues; 35% had drug misuse issues; 25% had spent time in a psychiatric unit; 21% reported alcohol misuse; and 17% of participants had been in care – which compares to less than 1% of the general population.
 - 1.2. Participants reported a diverse set of ‘trigger’ factors that led them to become street homeless. Eviction from properties due to loss of employment or other financial issues were commonly reported.** Among survey participants, a third (33%) were evicted or asked to leave their previous accommodation and 12% had money problems or rent arrears. Alcohol misuse was also reported as a reason behind homelessness.
 - 1.3. Participants acknowledged that funding cuts across the social care sector may have increased the risk of people becoming street homeless.** Cuts in services like drug and alcohol support and legal aid appear to be contributing to homelessness. A fifth (19%) of participants reported that they received no support to help prevent them from becoming homeless
 - 1.4. Participants reported that Housing Options Units had offered limited support.** Two thirds (66%) of survey participants had sought support from Housing Options Units since their current experience of homelessness but still had ended up rough sleeping. Participants reported that ‘priority need’ and ‘local connection’ were a barrier and they were turned away with little or no support.

- 2. Cuts to Day Centres and Outreach Not Helping.** Personal support needs were rarely being met while people were rough sleeping. Essential day-to-day needs like food were being met - once people had found day centres.

 - 2.1. Participants reported that when they first became street homeless they faced problems addressing their basic needs and faced isolation.** Many had had real difficulty locating services that were able to support them.
 - 2.2. Day Centres in Hammersmith & Fulham were a valued resource, however, participants reported they were less able to support clients than previously** due to opening hours being reduced and staff being increasingly under pressure.
 - 2.3. Outreach Teams received positive feedback with staff seen with high regard, however, participants reported slow response times and a lack of Outreach staff on the street.** 80% of participants had had contact with a street Outreach worker and commonly reported they were ‘knowledgeable’ and ‘dedicated’. However, there was an awareness that they were limited in power to access services.

3. Lack of Accommodation. The type of accommodation that was available to participants was not felt to meet their needs.

- 3.1. Participants reported overwhelmingly that they desired to move into social housing but acknowledged a lack of supply would prevent this.**
- 3.2. Resistance to moving into hostels was common with participants explaining that the chaotic environment, poor quality accommodation and limited opportunities for move-on being the key reasons.** Only two participants in this study told us they wanted to move into a hostel. Unprompted conversations in separate focus groups highlighted some participant's preference for prison rather than moving into hostel accommodation.
- 3.3. Many participants had had negative experiences living in private rented accommodation which alongside expensive rents and deposits meant they were sceptical of moving into this type of accommodation.** Only 14% wanted to move into private rented accommodation, however, many participants highlighted that this may be the only available long term option and with secure tenancies and more control over conditions they would be more willing to do so.
- 3.4. Ongoing support and meaningful opportunities for filling time were seen as key for maintaining accommodation once people have moved off the streets.** Participants identified that support workers played an important role in supporting participants to maintain accommodation and to move into training, volunteering or work opportunities.

4. Benefits System Perpetuating Homelessness. The benefits system was highlighted as a contributing factor to perpetuating homelessness.

- 4.1. Difficulties with benefits were widespread among participants and for some this had been the trigger for becoming homeless.** Half of survey participants had had some problems claiming benefits. Of these, the most common problems were delays in payments (62%), unhelpful staff (35%) and benefits being stopped (35%).
- 4.2. The day-to-day challenges of rough sleeping can make it difficult to maintain benefits.** Getting to appointments at Job Centres and difficulty searching for work while street homeless mean that sanctions are common.
- 4.3. Many participants highlighted concerns around the system of payment for Universal Credit particularly for people who have drug and alcohol misuse support needs.** The way that payments were made at once were seen as an issue for participants.

5. Five Key Principles. Participants highlighted a key set of principles that they felt were essential for supporting people to effectively escape rough sleeping. The 5 Key Principles highlighted are:

1. **Focusing on Prevention.** Participants felt that if they had been prevented from becoming homeless to begin with they would not have developed many of the issues they now face and support costs would have been lower.
2. **The Right Support Staff.** Participants highlighted how it is essential to have a support worker who believes in the person and is willing to go the 'extra mile' whichever the service. It is essential that the roles of support and enforcement (for rent payment etc.) are kept separate. Having a support worker who has personal experience of homelessness is highly desirable.
3. **Psychological Support.** Recognising the complex needs and traumatic histories that many participants reported, a need for psychological support was identified as important to moving on from homelessness.
4. **The Right Opportunities.** Finding meaningful opportunities for people in volunteering and employment were highlighted as key to moving on from homelessness. A mixture of support work, training courses and practical opportunities to build skills were key to moving on.
5. **A Home.** Participants in this study reported that the thing they need most to escape homelessness was long-term, secure and affordable accommodation. Once this foundation is in place participants felt they would be better equipped to address any issues they may have.

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Introduction

This study forms part of the Hammersmith & Fulham Rough Sleeper Commission, was conducted by Groundswell and was led by Peer Researchers. It aimed to meaningfully engage people experiencing homelessness in the Commission. The study engaged 108 people who are currently homeless and who have experience of rough sleeping in Hammersmith in Fulham, utilising focus groups and one-to-one survey based interviews.

Aim: To enable people with experience of homelessness to meaningfully contribute to the London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham's Commission on Rough Sleeping.

Background

The Hammersmith & Fulham Commission on Rough Sleeping was set up by Councillor Sue Fennimore to explore homelessness service delivery in Hammersmith and Fulham. Jon Sparkes Chief Executive of Crisis who was asked to Chair, approached Groundswell so that they could meaningfully engage people with personal experience of homelessness in this process.

According to official report from the rough sleeping database 'CHAIN' for the year 2015/16¹ 241 people were seen rough sleeping in the borough which represents a 50% increase when compared to 2014/15. Of these 30% have either spent over two years on the streets (Stock)² or have returned to the street of after a period of leave (Returners)³.

Looks to understand the reasons behind people rough sleeping, evaluate the support that is currently on offer and then explores the needs of participants.

Project Delivery

Research Questions. Working with Groundswell's Peer Researchers and with the input of the Commission, Groundswell developed a set of clear research questions that formed the foundations of the project. These would look to explore the following issues:

What are the factors that cause people to rough sleep in the borough of H&F?

Are support services in H&F meeting the needs of people who are rough sleeping? How effective are support services in supporting people to move off the streets?

How could the borough of Hammersmith & Fulham take steps to reduce rough sleeping in the borough? What changes could be made to support services to reduce rough sleeping in H&F?

Methodology. The project employed a peer-led methodology with input throughout the design and delivery of the project from people with lived experience of homelessness including all data collection. Mixed methods of data collection were employed utilising one-to-one survey based interviews and focus groups. The survey was designed to gather in-depth information about participants' experiences, backgrounds, and needs while the focus groups were designed to explore understandings and perceptions - creating a detailed body of knowledge to inform the Hammersmith & Fulham Rough Sleeping Commission. Informed consent was sought and received from all

¹ Taken from Hammersmith & Fulham CHAIN Report 2015/16. <https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/chain-reports>.

² People who were also seen rough sleeping 2014/15 (i.e. those seen across a minimum of two consecutive years).

³ People who were first seen rough sleeping prior to 2014/15, but were not seen during 2014/15 (i.e. those who have had a gap in their rough sleeping histories).

participants who took part. Audio recordings were transcribed, coded and analysed using NVivo and questionnaire responses were fed into SPSS data analysis software.

Training & Preparation. Groundswell undertook a recruitment process for peer researchers targeting homelessness services in the Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham. 3 Peer Researchers participated in the training and 2 went on to deliver fieldwork. We delivered a tailored training programme for our Peer Researchers including confidentiality, consent and boundaries; the history of peer research; best practices in managing bias and pre-understanding and training on the employed research methods and techniques. During the training, researchers developed skills through practical and hands-on tasks and exercises in which they tested and developed the tools while honing their own research skills.

Peer Research

True peer research works with people from a community as co-researchers engaged during the entirety of the data collection process, rather than simply as passive research subjects. The key advantage of taking this approach is that peer researchers can reduce problematic power relationships that can exist when interviewing people who are experiencing social exclusion, often resulting in richer data.

In total 52 one to one interviews and 9 focus groups with 56 participants were conducted. All research participants were either currently rough sleeping or had been in the last year. Including the 3 peer researchers a total of 111 people with experience of homelessness directly participated in this project.

Participant Profile

62% of participants were current rough sleepers with 23% having been street homeless for less than a month while 24% had been long term homeless for a year or more. The remaining 38% of participants reported to have slept rough in the last year. 88% of research participants were male and 12% reported to be female. The majority of participants were aged between 36-55 (59%), with 19% aged between 25-35, 6% aged 18-25 and 14% over 56 years old.

31% were White British, 19% White European and 12% Black Caribbean. 90% were male, reflecting the usual composition of street homeless populations. Only 6% were aged 25 or under while 44% were aged over 45.

Participants reported to have a wide range of support needs and experiences of living in institutional settings. These included high incidence of mental health (46%), with 25% have spent time in a psychiatric unit, drug misuse (35%) with 12% having had residential drug treatment. Alcohol misuse was reported by 21% with 6% having residential alcohol treatment. 40% reported physical health issues with 12% having been in hospital for more than three months. Criminal justice issues were reported by 31%, although 42% said they had been in prison and 8% had been in a young offenders' institution. Other issues reported were: coming to the UK from abroad (39%), experience of domestic violence (23%), time in care (17%), time in the armed forces (14%), learning difficulties such as dyslexia (12%), and moving to London in the last year (12%). Only two people said they had none of these needs.

Percentage of Participants facing types of disadvantage compared to general population.		
	Percentage in Study	Percentage in general population
Mental Ill Health	46%	17% ⁴
Drug Misuse Issues	35%	3.1% ⁵
Experience of domestic violence	23%	12.2% ⁶
Time in care	17%	1% ⁷
Time in the armed forces	14%	9.5% ⁸
Learning difficulties	12%	2.4% ⁹

⁴McManus S, Bebbington P, Jenkins R, Brugha T. (eds.) (2016) Mental health and wellbeing in England: Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey 2014. Leeds: NHS Digital. Available at:

<http://content.digital.nhs.uk/catalogue/PUB21748/apms-2014-full-rpt.pdf> [Accessed 21 June 2017]

⁵Statistics on Drug Misuse, England 2014. Published by the Health and Social Care Information Centre Part of the Government Statistical Service. Available at:

<http://content.digital.nhs.uk/catalogue/PUB15943/drug-misu-eng-2014-rep.pdf> [Accessed 21 June 2017]

⁶Experience of Domestic Violence, ONS (2016), March 2015 Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW)

<http://safelives.org.uk/policy-evidence/about-domestic-abuse?gclid=COSzt4Wb29QCFWG17Qod6goOtQ> [Accessed 21 June 2017]

⁷Prison Reform Trust (2015). Risk, Adverse Influence and Criminalisation: Understanding the over-representation of looked after children in the youth justice system.

www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/risk_adverse_influence_criminalisation_lit_review_lo.pdf [Accessed 21 June 2017]

⁸The Royal British Legion working with The Forces in Mind Trust (2014). A UK Household Survey of The Ex-Service Community.

<http://www.britishlegion.org.uk/get-involved/campaign/public-policy-and-research/the-uk-ex-service-community-a-household-survey> [Accessed 21 June 2017]

⁹People with Learning Disabilities in England (2011). <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/learning-disabilities/help-information/learning-disability-statistics-> [Accessed 21 June 2017]

Preventing street homelessness

Why are people rough sleeping in Hammersmith & Fulham?

For participants in this study the reasons why they became street homeless are often diverse, however, some common 'triggers' can be identified. Among survey participants, a third (33%) were asked to leave their previous accommodation or evicted and 12% had money problems or rent arrears. In focus groups, loss of employment was often cited as the trigger that led to becoming homeless, and similarly common was the impact of Drugs and Alcohol misuse.

"I was an alcoholic going back about ten years ago. I couldn't get out of bed without being sick and shaking. And I had to drink to make that stop. And then I never got any help for that. The only help I got for that was the council kicking me out of my flat." – Focus Group Participant

However, while it is far more difficult to quantify triggers than it is to measure the 'cause' of participant's homelessness. In focus groups this was a topic of conversation as participants often explained that they had suffered a series of misfortunes and difficult personal histories. One participant explained his story:

"Where does it start and where does it stop, you know? To be made homeless. Obviously, there is underlying issues. My mum died of heroin so I was born a heroin baby. And at 20 years old when she died my sisters and brothers got put in care. And the council come round, took her family house off me, said they were going to put me in a hostel. But I went to prison. I had a heart attack, pneumonia, went into a coma for two weeks. And then I rebuilt myself. And I went off with my wife for eight years. And then married her, went to [Town].... And then I sat in the car for two days and I realised she won't let me back in the house. So I had come all the way from [Town], losing my job and everything to London. And the first couple of weeks I kicked a football, broke my leg, my foot in three places. So I come out of work and I am not only homeless and no work, sold my van, sold my car and my foot was in plaster cast. And for nine months I become an alcoholic. Two years later I was homeless, out on the street, had no one to ... you know. So I had just gone from having everything to having nothing. But I wake up every morning and look at the pictures of my kids and hate myself for who I am. But then on the street ... so begin to take cocaine, take whatever was available and then I am alright. And then in the morning I have got to wake and look at that picture again and think to myself what have you become and how far away from home am I already?" - Focus Group Participant

What support would have prevented homelessness?

This often diverse set of issues is reflected in the type of support that participants felt would have been crucial in preventing them from becoming homeless. Survey participants identified that there were a wide range of services that would have helped prevent them become homeless. Perhaps unsurprisingly, 52% said help to find or keep accommodation might have prevented homelessness. However, Participants identified significant levels of need for other support services. 27% said counselling might have helped. 14% thought social services might have helped and the same proportion identified help to find work. 12% identified debt/money management, a drugs service, mental health service or probation service. Only 15% did not think that any services might have prevented them becoming homeless.

For this reason, how long participants have been experiencing homelessness in a broader sense was often difficult to pinpoint, particularly as for many their current episode of street homelessness was not their first. While for 29% of survey participants their current episode of street homelessness

was their first, the same proportion had been street homeless five times or more. Among those who had experienced street homelessness on previous occasions, there was a high proportion for whom it had been long term, with 69% being street homeless for more than a year in total. Immediately before they first became street homeless, 32% had been private tenants, 27% living with parents and 22% with friends or relatives. 70% had been in that accommodation for longer than a year and 46% for longer than 5 years.

Focus Groups commonly touched on how support services were becoming harder to access, with the reason often sited that funding cutbacks were making essential services more selective. One participant reported the difficulty he had had accessing mental health services:

"It's getting harder now to actually book yourself into [Mental Health Support Service]. I would have done that a long time ago. I will be honest with you. They think you are not mad enough or whatever. You are not running around the streets naked and trying to jump in front of buses and stuff like that. That's the level of madness you have to be now. You can't be suffering from depression or anything like that. Even though depression usually makes people jump off bridges and stuff like that. Which is something that mental health [services] should help you avoid. But they don't.... Admit you for a simple thing like depression. It's not a simple thing, it's a very bad thing. Depression is one of the main things. Even if you don't have any other underlying mental health issues or drug issues or whatever. Being homeless you will suffer from depression. It's not a question." – Focus Group Participant

Another participant reported how the difficulty she had had getting legal aid to fight a 'rogue' landlord had ultimately resulted in her becoming street homeless and had left her emotionally distressed.

"I don't have the money to defend myself [In Court], I have to rely on the public purse and at the end of the day if I had won anything, all that money would have gone back to the public purse but it...off your back, so to speak, off you as a client, legal aid firms were earning money but not doing their job. I know I should never have been evicted after fighting that man for such a long time. He wouldn't let me in to get my belongings, he got private bailiffs and dogs to get me out as if I was some sort of animal. No, he really had it in for me and I think that should not be allowed because it's... again, it should be illegal somehow. You know, private landlords it feels like they can come and beat you up. My personality just, bit by bit, was just chipped away and chipped away and chipped away until inside I know there is nothing left in me. So even the slightest thing now just sets me off, you know, even here [Day Centre] I might hear one phrase or something or I feel I'm not being listened to and the whole lot keeps flooding back. Everything that I experienced in that last 25 years and then this rough sleeping, I ended up homeless and I walked around like a zombie. That first day I was in such a state of shock I had my rucksack, my laptop, I grabbed my mobile and that was all I had. I had no chargers, no money, no credit cards, no, you know, and I built my life with my hands and I, at the moment I feel it's not just the housing I feel as though I've been raped of my past, my present and my future and my future because I just feel hopeless at the moment. How am I ever going to rebuild my life again?" – Focus group Participant

These discussions reveal the value of support services beyond just housing support in preventing homelessness. For a fifth (19%) of survey participants they reported that they received no support to help prevent them from becoming homeless. Survey participants were asked what help they had sought to avoid becoming homeless; 40% sought help to find or keep accommodation, 14% sought help to find work, help from a drugs service, from a mental health service, or other medical service.

12% sought help with debt / money management, family mediation, counselling or from social services. But only two people said they didn't want help.

Housing Options and Homeless Solutions Units

66% of survey participants had sought support from Housing Options Units since their current experience of homelessness. Of these, 39% of survey participants had tried to get help from H&F Homeless Solutions Unit and 37% had tried to get help from a HPU in a different area (12% of participants had been to two boroughs). Of those who had approached the H&F Homeless Solutions Unit, a third said it had led to a plan to get them off the streets. Of the 12 people who had not received a plan, 9 had been told they were not in priority need and 5 that they were intentionally homeless. Of the 19 people who had been in contact most (13) thought the HSU unhelpful.

A key issue in terms of accessing support at the H&F Housing Solutions Unit is that many of those who are rough sleeping in Hammersmith and Fulham may not have a local connection. For example, 32% of survey participants had been living in H&F immediately before their current or most recent experience of rough sleeping. However, focus group participants who were in this situation were often angry that no support or advice was offered to them.

“Well at Hammersmith council the other week, I went up there and I went with one of the workers here [Day Centre]. And I have been in here, told them the situation like... they phoned me cousin up and she told them no. I don't want him here, can't live here. Nothing. So you'd think they'd help me. You know like. I got told go back to Harrow train station. That was the council. They literally told me to go back on the streets. You know what I mean. I've got illnesses. They didn't want to know. Got thrown out. Me and the support worker, who had a go at them. So he has put in a complaint about them. I don't think she had a right to say to me get back on the streets back to harrow train station. Back to where you come from. I think that is wrong that. They shouldn't say that to people.” – Focus Group Participant

The topic of 'priority need' was highlighted in surveys as an issue and often sparked heated conversations in the focus groups as participants often felt that they had been misjudged as not being 'vulnerable'. For example, a number of participants reported how they had been turned away from the HSU after being told they were not in priority need, despite the fact they were in poor physical or mental health:

“I had physical injuries. Wouldn't assist unless you could produce 5 years of medical records.” – Survey Participant

“I was just discharged from psychiatric unit. The council wouldn't help even though my social worker knew I should be priority. They should help vulnerable people I had paperwork to prove my I had just been sectioned.” – Survey Participant

This is particularly poignant as 31% of survey participants considered they had a disability. It also sparked debates from those who felt that they were left open to vulnerability for not being 'vulnerable enough' already. One focus group participant explained how he had been evicted from a shared house but was unable to get support from the local authority.

“So everyone was made homeless, people managed to sort out their own stuff. But I was stuffed because the council put me in the position where they don't want to help. Council don't want to help anybody as far as I am concerned. Unless your head is hanging off by one piece of skin or you are pregnant or whatever, they are not going to help you. What happens to these single people who are

out there? What, you think they deserve to be homeless? I don't understand it." – Focus Group Participant

The Homeless Reduction Act

The New Homeless Reduction Act places a new duty on local authorities to help prevent the homelessness of all families and single people, regardless of priority need, who are eligible for assistance and threatened with homelessness. This includes:

- An extension of the period during which an authority should treat someone as threatened with homelessness from 28 to 56 days, and clarification of the action an authority should take when someone applies for assistance having been served with a section 8 (1) or section 21 (2) notice. These provisions represent a shift in focus to early intervention, and aim to encourage local housing authorities to act quickly and proactively, addressing some concerns that some previously only intervened at crisis point.
- A new duty to prevent homelessness for all eligible applicants threatened with homelessness, regardless of priority need. This extends the help available to people not in priority need, with local housing authorities supporting them to either stay in their accommodation or help them find somewhere to live and should mean fewer households reach a crisis situation.
- A new duty to relieve homelessness for all eligible homeless applicants, regardless of priority need. This help could be, for example, the provision of a rent deposit or debt advice. Those who have a priority need will be provided with interim accommodation whilst the Local Housing Authority carries out the reasonable steps.
- A new duty on public services to notify a local authority if they come into contact with someone they think may be homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. It is hoped that this measure will ensure that a person's housing situation is considered when they come into contact with wider public services, and encourage public services to build strong relationships based on local need and circumstances.

Source: Homeless Link 2017. Available at: www.homeless.org.uk

Brokerage & Advocates to Access Accommodation

Participants highlighted a need for support to be able to affectively engage the particularly at times of crisis it can be difficult to deal with the assessment process and know your rights. A suggestion was made in one focus group around the need to have an independent advocate with knowledge around the legal implications to support people through this process:

"The first problem I would say that most people probably in this room realise, that the first thing you go to the council about, [You need] a lawyer next to you, a member of groundswell or a charity with you, [because] the person at the front desk seems like the first line of defence with the council. No matter what your case, you can come with two broken legs, having heart attack and they will rebuff you... There should be some sort of intermediary, maybe like Groundswell or a charity. But someone needs to actually assess thoroughly. Sees what the case independent and then presents it to the council, and then they ankle a decision on your case. But rather than turning up to a front desk and just saying.... Can't help you. You just get stuck in the system." – Focus Group Participant

Support when Rough Sleeping

Support when first street homeless

A majority of survey participants had a range of serious problems after they first became homeless. Participants commonly highlighted that the initial period when people became street homeless was the hardest due to “being hungry and cold”, difficulty “keeping clean” and “not having money” were often compounded by “stress”, “feeling isolated” and “feeling vulnerable”. Three quarters reported problems finding accommodation, around half had problems over what to do and where to go, with sorting out benefits, personal hygiene, physical health, isolation and loneliness, trying to survive on the streets and lack of a fixed address. Between a quarter and a third reported problems with drug use, mental health care and accessing care for physical health. The same proportions experienced problems of negative attitudes to homeless people, getting ID and access to the internet / phone.

A common concern was around knowing where to go and how to access services. This participants experience was common:

“Because first of all I didn’t know where to go, it was someone by chance... I came here crying because I looked in, it said homeless place and they said to me “no, you can’t self-refer”. I was crying, I was bent double because of the cold and you know, I was aching and they wouldn’t let me in. And then finally the lady said call this number but I didn’t know I could call that number, you know. So there’s so much information that people don’t know, we don’t know where to go.” – Focus Group Participant.

We explored how survey participants were supported once they were rough sleeping and by which services. Among survey participants 80% had had contact with a street Outreach worker and almost all had used a day centre. Other sources of support that participants had sought to address their needs were; 29% other homeless people, 21% a job centre or benefits office and smaller proportions from hostels, drugs and alcohol services, mental health services, other medical services, social workers and the police.

Day Centres

All but one of the participants had used day centres in Hammersmith & Fulham. Day Centres play a valuable role in supporting people who are street homeless and participants particularly valued the way that they met their day-to-day needs like showers, food and a place to charge phones. A common topic when day centres were discussed were the opening hours that they run and how well these met the needs of rough sleepers:

Day Centre	Opening Times
Baron’s Court Project	Monday: 2pm - 5pm drop-in Tuesday: 11am-12.30pm (1 to 1 advice) Wednesday: 2pm-5pm drop-in Thursday: 11am-12.30pm (1 to 1 advice) Friday: 2-5pm GPG, 12-2pm Women’s Group
The Upper Room	Monday: 5.30pm - 6.45pm meals Tuesday: 5.30pm - 6.45pm meals Wednesday: 5.30pm - 6.45pm meals Thursday: 5.30pm - 6.45pm meals Friday: 5.30pm - 6.45pm meals
St Mungo's - Broadway Day Centre	Monday: 10am - 11am open access Tuesday: Appt only Wednesday: 10am - 11am open access Thursday: 10am - 11am open access Friday: 10am - 11am open access
Source: www.homeless.org.uk	

“So homeless centres yeah, they are primarily targeting homeless people on the streets, to get them off the streets. But most of them are opening up at 9 o’clock in the morning, office hours. We need for them to open at seven o’clock in the morning so we can get off the street early in the morning, get showered up and stuff and be out at nine o’clock looking for work and stuff. But if you go in there nine o’clock you are not going to be able to get out until about eleven o’clock. Open earlier.” – Focus Group Participant.

This was particularly the case with regard to a statutory funded day centre which had reduced its drop in operating hours to one hour a day. Some participants reported that there was some irony to continue to call this a ‘Day Centre’. However, participants also commonly acknowledged that homelessness services were under increased pressure due to funding cuts, and not only did this result in a smaller offer but it also meant that staff at building based services were less able to support them.

“With them [Support Workers] they just don’t have the time to work with you – people go with their problems and it’s like they don’t care. Or they haven’t the time. It’s their job to care. It’s their job that they are on time. And the people walk away more confused sometimes than helped.” – Focus Group Participant.

Outreach Teams

While 80% of participants had had contact with a street Outreach worker since they had been rough sleeping and three quarters of these (75%) felt that the support they received was either ‘fairly helpful’ or ‘very helpful’. Generally, feedback on their support was quite positive with participants often using terms to describe Outreach team staff as ‘knowledgeable’, ‘professional’ and ‘dedicated’. Some focus group participants highlighted the feeling of ‘security’ offered by having Outreach teams on hand:

“Well in one way it’s not nice that they wake you up at one or two o’clock in the night. But in the other way they check on you and that is important because then you know... alright they don’t come every day around but at least you know somebody is looking after you. Somebody there [unclear] police or whatever it is. Of the people who sleep out on the street, it is never safe. And that’s a thing with an outreach worker, actually, you know someone is around.” – Focus Group Participant

The key themes in terms of negative feedback was that the Outreach teams were too few in number and that response times (to Streetlink calls) were often slow. Participants also acknowledged that while Outreach workers could be personally supportive, the ‘power’ they have is limited to the services on offer elsewhere. For example, one focus group participant explained how he was unable to get a referral from an outreach worker into a hostel:

“Usually they come qualified and if they are not they are with somebody who is. So I can’t really tell an outreach worker what to do. Because I have found with the outreach, one minute they have the power, the next minute they didn’t have any power at all. Example – one minute they were putting people in hostels next minute they weren’t able to put people in hostels.” – Focus Group Participant

Other Sources of Support

Participants in this study had had to resort to a variety of avenues in order to survive living on the street. A high number of participants had relied on food banks, mentioned by 56% of survey participants. This was followed by begging (27%), crime and cash in hand jobs (14% each), with small numbers mentioning official jobs, asylum vouchers, busking and Big Issue selling. At least three focus group participants reported to have some form of work that they relied on for supporting themselves, however, in many cases the income did not meet their immediate needs.

Moving Out of Rough Sleeping

The right type of accommodation

During the study, there were no participants who told us that they wanted to sleep rough. We asked participants which type of accommodation they would like to move into, 64% hoped to move into social housing and 14% into private rented accommodation. Only four people said they had been offered accommodation and had refused it. However, participants identified multiple barriers that they might face in moving into their desired type of accommodation, most common were not being in 'priority need' or waiting lists for social housing. Another key theme across all types of desired accommodation was financial barriers like not having benefits in place or the cost of deposits and rent. As one focus group participant explains:

"You see it all the time. New apartments and flats. And you see them all the time. I mean obviously that is not something that we could get now because we can't afford it. They say affordable housing but how can we afford it? How is it affordable to us?" – Focus Group Participant

Resistance to move into hostels

Only 2 survey participants told us that they wanted to move into a hostel. We explored in focus groups and open ended questions why participants were resistant to moving into temporary accommodation like hostels; the most common response related to the chaotic nature of living in a hostel due to the high levels of support needs faced by people living there. One focus group participant explained it this way:

"It is a little bit of an oxymoron, because you have got to understand that a lot of the people who have substance misuse issues and alcoholism, these people have chaotic lifestyles. And if one person has got a chaotic lifestyle, imagine what 20 people is going to be like in one enclosed space. And then you get the people who are nice and who don't have issues and get thrown into that, it's like oh my god what is going on here." – Focus Group Participant

Another common theme among participants was the quality of the accommodation on offer in hostels. One survey participant explained why he would not move into a hostel:

"Tiny rooms, unsuitable cooking facilities, high rent so you have to stay on benefits to pay for it. You become trapped." – Survey Participant

These feelings were further compounded by the limited move-on opportunities that were available in hostels. Therefore there is a risk that people will not be able to move on. Lack of move-on opportunities mean that some people are unwilling to move into temporary accommodation... When does temporary accommodation become permanent?

"You speak to most people in the hostels they have been there for multiple years. Whereas in times gone by a year, 18 months or so. But now people have been four or five years and haven't even had a chance to move on." – Focus Group Participant

Interestingly there were a number of unprompted conversations in separate focus groups around preference for prison rather than moving into hostel accommodation, with the reasons that safety was often better in prisons. Some focus group participants would prefer to have their liberty removed in order to feel safe in temporary accommodation.

"[Prison] its safe place to crash. And I have been to prison for four weeks. I don't know the rest of our experiences. Basically I would like to have a shelter centre with like little cells that you could crash for

the night, they open from 9pm to nine am, for the homeless. To take a rest, to be secure, to be away from the rain. Have a little privacy.” – Focus Group Participant

Difficulty Accessing the PRS

There was a realisation among many participants that although they desired to live in social housing, the reality was the best accommodation they could hope for was in the Private Rented Sector. As one survey participant explained:

“Bedroom tax, benefit caps, waiting list for accommodation - there's not enough. I have no choice when they find a place in PRS I have to take it.” – Survey Participant

Many participants had had negative experience of living in the PRS previous to becoming street homeless and this often related to poor quality accommodation and a lack of security in a tenancy. This meant that many participants were concerned about returning to the PRS.

“You still want a reasonably secure tenancy, not one of these short-term contracts.... At the whim of the landlord. And in horrendous conditions. I mean some of the slums I have seen. I know friends who have tried to mend a tile in the bathroom – Sellotape. Hygiene, all the rest of it.” – Participant

Commonly participants highlighted the difficulty they faced finding the money for deposits and maintaining payment of rents which were often thought to be unaffordable. Again, previous negative experiences had an impact on this as 21% of participants owed rent to a previous landlord. This was by far the greatest concern around moving into the PRS:

“They ask for two months deposit. Saying yes we accept DSS, but you have to pay a month’s deposit. And it’s like, I have rung up a few places, they are like oh yeah we accept DSS but we need £2800. I am on benefits, where am I going to get that money from? We all want to be in a place where we can just be at home... we just want the basic, we want a home. That is what we want. We are not asking for a mansion with a pool and a wide screen TV. Not asking for that.” – Focus Group Participant

Maintaining Accommodation

This study asked participants to identify what support they would need to move out of rough sleeping. In reflection of the range of support needs that participant reported to face, participants highlighted a wide range of services that they would need. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most common need identified was ‘help to keep accommodation’ (71%) and around half identifying counselling, money management advice, help to find work, drug and alcohol services, mental health services, resettlement support, social services, and help from friends and relatives. Around a third identified family mediation, mentoring / befriending and probation and a quarter (28%) mentioned relationship guidance. This focus group participant highlighted the need for tenancy support:

“I suppose if you want to go into independent living you are still having to manage all those things. Who is going to give you the support for the benefits? Who is going to be responsible for making sure you pay rent? There is all sorts of responsibility. See my bills and things like that, I like just doing it directly so I don’t have to worry about it.” – Focus Group Participant

Commonly participants highlighted the need for support into employment and volunteering as a step to move away from homelessness. This is a key role that support workers should play in supporting people to move away from homelessness.

“Getting homeless people into voluntary or paid work because it’s a positive thing, helps mental health and gives people a purpose.” - Survey Participants.

The Benefit System and Homelessness – Perpetuating the cycle of homelessness

Our findings reveal that in many cases the ‘safety net’ of welfare benefits is likely to have caused and in some cases is perpetuating people rough sleeping on the streets of Hammersmith & Fulham. Among participants claiming benefits was widespread, as was anger and frustration with the benefit system. 71% of participants were currently claiming benefits, with 29% who were not currently claiming any form of benefit. This compares to 46% who were not claiming before they became street homeless. The most common problems were delays in payments (62%), unhelpful staff (35%) and benefits stopped (35%). Only 6 people said that their problems were still unresolved.

Benefit Stops and Sanctions

Benefit Sanctions and stops were widespread among participants and had caused significant disadvantage to people when they had occurred. There was a genuine anger among participants for the anguish that people had faced due to what they felt were unfair decisions that had been made when they were at their most vulnerable. For some participants, delays in first payments coming through had failed to prevent people becoming homeless after losing employment:

“It was between me the housing and the job centre and I didn't get help till on the street. JSA advisor thought I would be ok but housing benefit was stopped cos of sanction” – Survey Participant

For others, benefits had been the trigger for people to become street homeless all together:

“Well there was a change in my housing benefits, I don't know why. And all of a sudden actually after six weeks you get a letter. It's not actually that they say. Because I phoned them and I said listen there is a change in my circumstances. Alright Mr [unclear] you go to the council over at the town hall. They don't know anything. And after six weeks they actually sent me a letter and they said you are not entitled anymore for housing benefits. Although I earned just £20 or £30 actually more a month. And there we go. Six years actually in a one bedroom flat. And now I am on a bench in the cemetery.” – Focus Group Participant

For others benefits and sanctions had resulted in people having to resort to crime in order to sustain themselves:

“Basically I haven't been paid since they stopped my JSA. I haven't had any money for five weeks. And because I am not making another claim – I am waiting for this appeal. But because I haven't made another claim, these last four or five weeks that I haven't been getting my JSA, if the decision goes against me they are going to turn round and say well you weren't getting benefit during that former period. You owe us £1000 in rent. Things like that. But I wasn't getting any income, so I've got zero income. I have been living like... friends of mine are giving me a bit of tobacco, or going and nicking a bit of food from the shop. Things like that. It's ridiculous. You should be able to show your bank statement. Look I have got zero money coming in, whether I am getting benefit or not, I am entitled to fucking housing benefit, you know what I mean? Because that is a big problem. That is a big fucking problem. And this universal credit is a fucking nightmare. I can't handle it. I can't cope. I have been feeling like hanging myself.” – Focus Group Participant

Accessing Benefits While Rough Sleeping

The day-to-day challenges of Rough Sleeping can make it difficult to maintain benefits. For example, getting to appointments at Job Centres and difficulty searching for work while street homeless were commonly reported as problems. Typical feedback on benefits were as follows:

“Difficulty working with job centres. The appointments are murder sometimes If the make them in a.m. I can't get there” – Survey Participant

“Take into consideration that homeless people have difficulty looking for a job for 40 hours a week” – Survey Participant

Many participants in this study had reported that they felt this had made it more difficult for them to escape homelessness, and had even prevented escape in some cases. The psychological impact of this frustrating reality is explained by the following participant:

“And the system that we are facing now in London, the money and everything, it makes people numb. It makes you not want to progress in your life because you feel so far away from home. Because how can you expect to save up a month's fucking deposit, a month's rent, then make sure... and then you fuck up with your claim the housing benefit and the people come so hard down on you and say oh you need to tell us that one week, you are [unclear] this week. They are always shutting doors and making it harder. It's actually you are a total tosser and you have got nothing and don't bother with you -when they should bother with you.” – Focus Group participant

Universal Credit

Another common theme around benefits were concerns around the implementation of Universal Credit and the impact the new method of payments in particular might have on individuals. Participants felt that the potential for causing homelessness, particularly for people with support needs, were worrying.

“But I don't agree with this [Universal Credit] being paid...the rent into your account. Because that is like telling... that is basically they are blatantly telling you we want you to be homeless. We don't want you to live in a house. Even people who have got somewhere to live, they don't want their – like people who have got somewhere to live, the housing benefit is being paid, they might have a drink problem or a drug problem or something like that. You put £1000 in their account...way! It's party time, they don't care.” – Focus Group Participant

Principles of Supporting People off the Street

We asked participants in this study what they needed to move off of the street and to escape homelessness. While the material needs of having stable accommodation were first, many participants felt that there were some key elements they would need to help them escape for good. These could be grouped into 5 key areas – and we have called them ‘principles’ as participants have highlighted what they need and for the commission to achieve its goal of reducing rough sleeping in Hammersmith & Fulham there will need to be recognition that these principles are needed to support them.

Principle 1: Focus on Prevention

Preventing homelessness is the most effective way to end homelessness. While this would also be the most cost-effective intervention it would also result in the destruction of the lives of the individuals who would end up on the street. Commonly participants told us how if they had avoided becoming homeless many of their current physical/mental health and drug/alcohol issues may not have developed to the point they are currently at.

Key to achieving this is fully funded social support that can support people to prevent them reaching a point of crisis where their home may be at risk including drug and alcohol services, mental health and domestic violence services.

Hammersmith & Fulham Homeless Solutions Unit and Housing Options Units in other boroughs play an essential role homelessness prevention a reality. As we have already highlighted, 66% of participants had sought support from Housing Options Units since their current experience of homelessness, this demonstrates that people automatically approach the local authority when in need but are too often turned away for not meeting criteria. To truly make a difference the Housing Options Unit should not be turning people away without a viable plan even if they do not have a local connection and cannot be directly housed by the local authority.

“The council [need] to give more than the phone number to no second night out. They could have seen if I was healthy, asked what I needed and given accommodation. I had to sleep in the park for two weeks and no one from outreach called me.” – Focus Group Participant

Principle 2: The Right Support

Many of the participants who were moving away from homelessness told us the difference that getting support that met their needs made the difference, and central to this is having a support worker who “believes in” and can recognise and support them around their individual needs. For some participants, it didn’t matter where this support was coming from, be it a day centre, a hostel or the Job Centre, but having one key person makes all the difference.

“More proactive. Deal with people as individuals on their own merit, don’t make people feel in debt / looked down on. Also follow up help after house. Treat as they would want for themselves” – Survey Participant

As discussed previously, participants in this study felt that staff in homelessness services were increasingly under pressure and could not currently offer them the support they needed. Staff are

often overworked, stressed and can become 'jaded'. One participant explained how he had had two very different experiences of support when he had been homeless on different occasions:

"How do they support you, man? I have never had any support. I am telling you now I come out of prison weeks ago. I have met my probation officer twice. I am supposed to see her once a week. She said I will phone you up. I told her I was coming out and I come out. She didn't tell me nothing. She didn't give me no numbers. She didn't tell me about housing. She didn't do nothing. Do you know who got me in contact with all of this, and got me off the street? The job centre. Out of all services and out of all the people you know, the job centre was the one to get me help, get me housed, get me into things. None of the probation officers, none of these key workers. It's all bollocks. There's all these people going Oh hi, my name is John, how are you feeling today? Rate yourself one out of 20. And that's all the help they are giving me. They gave me time, they talked to me. They treated me like a human being. They said go to [Hostel]. I went there, had to go there for a couple of times. They come and see me living on the streets and they come. But not my probation officer who is paid by the government [to have] done that. Who's supposed to look after my wellbeing. [...] They should have thought he is someone who is worth helping, he has lived in that society all his life." – Focus Group Participant

Another key element that makes support more effective is the separation of support from the enforcement of rules and rent collection in accommodation and other services – not giving warnings and chasing rent payments but supporting people to live independently and move on. Some participants highlighted how when the priorities of the individual appear to be collecting rent then it is difficult to trust them in a supporting role. By separating out these functions it is easier to feel that a support worker is on 'your side'.

"They [Support Workers] don't support you when they want to give you a warning, come out for a fire alarm going off, something like that. Things like that. Or remind you about the money you owe them in rent and stuff like that. But actually like my support worker [...] when I was going to I was on police bail for this charge I was on. Anyway it's gone now. But I thought I might get charged today, I had to go back to the police station. And if I do get charged I am going to be up in court tomorrow and they will probably refuse bail or object to bail. Right. Now I said can you just write me a little character reference, just three or four sentences. Saying since I have known him he has been volunteering. I am not a bad guy you know what I mean? You know what, she couldn't be bothered to do that. It would have taken ten fucking minutes to do it. [...] They are alright to scream and shout at you and talk to you like you are nothing." – Focus Group Participant

The value of having support from people who have personal experience of homelessness was frequently highlighted by participants in this study. It was felt that not only did this quality make a support worker easier to trust and build a relationship with but it was felt that it was also a positive opportunity for people to help others and move on from homelessness themselves. By offering more roles ring fenced for people with experience of homelessness, and peer-to-peer support many participants felt homelessness services would be far more effective. As this participant explains:

"...employ more people from the homeless sector that have used services and they want to give back something. These people they will get a chance, they will, they will get a chance to rehabilitate that are currently in the homeless sector. And they know a lot more about it. They know exactly what you are going through and they will be able to relate to you better as well. So homeless people would be given a lot more chances to work in homeless centres after." – Focus Group Participant

Principle 3: The Right Opportunities

Not only does it take the right support to move away from homelessness, but just as important is to have the right opportunities to learn and develop skills. Participants often highlighted that they had been sent on many courses to learn new skills (commonly IT was discussed) and while the opportunity was appreciated there were only so many courses that people felt they needed.

“It doesn’t matter how many courses you get put on. I’ve got a PhD in electronics. I have got a fucking four star CV [...] for all the qualifications I have got, because I am doing course after course. I never had in all of them courses a single second to even think about finding somewhere to live. While I was homeless because of the course. So why put people on course.” – Focus Group Participant

For some people who were currently rough sleeping, courses did not seem like a viable route out of rough sleeping when the resource invested in sending people on the course could be better used to support people to find accommodation. Then, once stable, the opportunity to do training seemed a far more beneficial option.

However, ‘keeping busy’ was seen as an important element of surviving rough sleeping and some participants highlighted how volunteering, often in the services they used themselves was an important part of maintaining this. Doing hands on roles also provided practical opportunities to develop skills which some participants preferred to class based training courses:

“You see people who do a job.... The job I do in here [Day Centre], talking with people. Even I am volunteer at the moment. You get the streets better than anybody else because you have been there, you did that. Working with homeless people you have been homeless before. It’s good. It is a very good skill.” – Focus Group Participant

Principle 4: Psychological Support

Throughout this report we have highlighted how many participants in this study had complex and disadvantaged histories that had led to them becoming homeless. Some participants told us how trauma that had lingered from these difficult circumstances was now a factor in why they were finding it difficult to move out of rough sleeping. Some participants in this study highlighted how their psychological issues had made it difficult for them to engage with support services.

“No I wasn’t engaged with anybody. I mentally couldn’t. The only people I was going to see was at [Women’s Centre] at the end of that, I stayed at the [Hostel] I didn’t want to engage with them either.” – Focus Group Participant

For others, previous personal issues were the reasons behind chaotic lifestyles that had been driven by drug or alcohol misuse. Speaking about an experience of abuse in his childhood one participant discussed how he had not addressed the trauma of his childhood and this was having a negative impact on his adult life:

“Yeah there were no services then. I didn’t tell anybody for 30 years. It’s been 30 years still told no one about it. There are much more these days. It’s almost more like places that will probably help. [...The result is] Fucking hell! I am going to do this tomorrow. And then tomorrow comes and I go no I am going to do it next day. It is such a bullshit easy way out. It’s just finding the strength to make you want to do it. I find that I lose myself every day, a bit of myself. Wanting to be a better man to go and see my kids. And it’s not the drugs and the drink, it’s why I do it.” – Focus Group Participant

Participants in this study were very aware of the cuts to health and social care budgets that were making it more difficult to access support, however, there was a call to have access to have psychological support as an element of a package to move away from homelessness. For some participants, if this support did not come then they saw no escape from homelessness as being possible:

“You forget. You do. It’s just... you forget. When you’re doing that shit, you just don’t think about your stress, all the shit... I mean a lot of the time I would say on a daily basis – I haven’t thought about it today but ... but you know I visualise topping myself or stepping in front of a bus. If I get on a tube I can’t stand on the platform, I stand in the middle of the tunnel. Because I get that urge to jump in front of the fucking train.” – Focus Group Participant

Principle 5: A Home.

We asked participants in this study what it would take to help them move away from rough sleeping, the most common response was to have a home. Participants told us that long-term, stable and affordable accommodation. For example, among survey participants, while a quarter of responses to this question were a need for ‘work’, two thirds mentioned (affordable) accommodation. A common response was the following:

“Give people a guarantee of accommodation, people need stability. Affordable accommodation.”

There was recognition among participants that the economic climate in London can make access to stable accommodation difficult. However, having stable accommodation was seen as the foundation to escaping homelessness and without it people did not see their cycle of homelessness being broken. This is particularly so as the lack of access to permanent stable accommodation was a barrier to moving into temporary accommodation. As this participant explains:

“If you are homeless instead of getting stuck on some course somewhere, instead of going somewhere on a course while they are homeless, forget about going on a course. Help them get a house first.... And gradually build their lives back up together not just throw them in some courses. Say oh by the way when you finish your course you are still sleeping under that bridge down there because you haven’t got find somewhere to live.” – Focus Group Participant

Conclusion

This study has revealed that support services are falling short of meeting the needs of Rough Sleepers in Hammersmith & Fulham. In many cases the provision that was on offer to rough sleepers was felt to be perpetuating homelessness, and not tackling it. This is in terms of prevention, welfare benefits and accommodation on offer to rough sleepers. The issues the report has highlighted will not be rectified easily, but participants in this study have given some clear guidelines on the principles that any changes should follow if action is taken by Hammersmith & Fulham local authority to tackle rough sleeping. With the same resources spent in a different way and with brave decision making, with this Commission you have a real opportunity to rethink how Hammersmith & Fulham tackles homelessness. Preventing people from rough sleeping in the first place, and quickly housing those who do end up rough sleeping, will dramatically reduce the support needs that people have and therefore reduce the amount of resources poured into mopping up the problems caused by homelessness.

