



# Rough Justice

**uncovering social policies  
that create homelessness**





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Commonweal Housing is grateful to all those who have contributed to this report. The views and recommendations are those of individual contributors and do not necessarily reflect those of Commonweal Housing except where explicitly stated as such.

# Foreword

**Fiona Mactaggart MP, Chair, Commonweal Housing**

At Commonweal Housing we believe that social policy should support people to better their lives. Public policy should help to provide a step up for individuals trying to overcome difficult circumstances. It certainly should not leave the vulnerable with little or no basic welfare provision, or be the main reason children are kept away from their mothers, or deny compensation to those suffering a miscarriage of justice. Crucially (when found lacking) government should be held to account and be willing to change this sort of policy.

In this report we highlight many such policies that need to be addressed. This short collection brings together the voices of experts in the field of homelessness and other interested parties - organisations that see the very real and unfortunate impact of such policies on the lives of people they are working to help. We focus on housing in the knowledge that a secure home can provide a foundation for someone to overcome other challenges.

Commonweal is in a fortunate position of having worked in collaboration with the report contributors, using our housing resource to challenge social injustices of many kinds. This report offers an insight into diverse housing based projects and issues, all facing challenges due to the social policy landscape. It offers different perspectives of how social policy, inadvertently or otherwise, is contributing to homelessness.

Howard Sinclair discusses the need for women focused homelessness services, Morag MacDonald et al highlight the importance of a multi-agency partnership approach that addresses women's multiple needs, Alison Lamb explains the negative impact of limiting compensation payments for those who have been wrongfully imprisoned by the state, Bill Tidnam explores the very human impact of tough new Job Centre sanctions, Vaughan Jones tells how immigration policy is creating homelessness and destitution, and Elizabeth Balgobin puts forward recommendations for the future of London's housing market.

We hope from this report to have highlighted how social policies have a negative impact on many of the areas above. These are all issues Commonweal is involved with and know we have contributed towards alleviating many injustices. However, the government needs to make changes necessary to ensure that no-one is left homeless, in inappropriate accommodation, or inadvertently penalised and prevented from moving forward in their life simply due to public policies that can be changed.

# Housing against injustice

**Ashley Horsey, Chief Executive, Commonweal Housing**

Commonweal Housing develops innovative housing based solutions to help people overcome a wide range of social injustices. We take an open approach to choosing which inequities to address, deciding on those areas where we can best use our housing resource to have a positive impact. Of course, with an ambition to tackle social injustice, this gives us a huge stage upon which to act.

**Partnership approach:** We work in partnerships with specialist charities, including those that have contributed to this report. Our expert partners in turn use the bespoke housing we provide to deliver solutions that support individuals to move on from difficult circumstances. We are passionate about our approach because we have seen how housing offers the stability and safe home environment needed for individuals to successfully overcome the other challenges they face.

**Sharing Learning:** Above all, Commonweal is a learning charity, an action-learning charity. We use our resources to provide the bespoke housing needed by our expert partners to enable them to develop and test new models. We commission ongoing evaluations throughout project lifecycles to capture learning and so develop replicable models that can be rolled out on a wider scale. The desire to continually and openly share what we learn through project development and delivery stages is an important part of our work; we believe this gives others an opportunity to build on successful models and just as importantly to benefit from our experience when projects do not work out as anticipated. Sometimes the projects don't work as envisioned – and this is OK, as long as we know why and which components contributed to this. We encourage and require openness and honesty from our project partners. We consider the real weakness to be not trying to find a solution and not trying to test new models and new projects in the first place.

**Social policies:** Through regular conversations with our partner charities we learn about the diverse and large range of issues that impact their work. A recurring theme challenging project design and delivery, are the barriers created by defective social policies, very often the very policies that should be helping people at a time of need.

**Housing based projects:** The projects we have supported since 2006 demonstrate the central importance of safe, available, appropriate housing. It gives the other support people are receiving the chance to gain real traction and to enable transition in peoples' lives. We have seen time and time again that the right housing, for the right people at the right time can make the step up shallower and easier to achieve.

The housing Commonwealth provides is used as a base for some projects that offer intensive support and a lot of interaction e.g. for women who have recently returned from rehab and are taking their own small steps away from a life of prostitution; or a mother, recently re-united with her children, trying to rebuild her life following prison. But in other cases the houses provide the base for less intensive support, e.g. informal house-shares for individuals following periods of homelessness and instability - allowing them to get back into the workforce, perhaps for the first time, or to enrol on an education or training course.

### **Some of our projects to date – highlighting the issues we address:**

- **Re-Unite:** helps mothers that are homeless upon release from prison to access suitable housing which enables them to be successfully re-united with their children.
- **Chrysalis:** provides a supported housing pathway for women exiting street-based prostitution.
- **Peer Landlord:** a supportive shared housing model for single homeless people, with an emphasis on those in employment and training.
- **No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF):** our latest project working with those trapped in destitution in the asylum system.

**Tenancy length:** In some projects it is intended to be temporary, transitional housing, enabling people to progress from a bad place in their lives to somewhere significantly better literally in some cases and certainly metaphorically. Chrysalis and NRPF are prime examples, these projects provide an accessible bridge. In others, notably Re-Unite and Peer landlord – the benefit of the accommodation is not down to any time limited focus on how long people can stay. The accommodation is generally available for as long as it fulfils a need for the individuals. There will be move on or transition to other accommodation for these individuals, but these are more likely to be aspirational moves when they themselves are ready to move forwards – in just the same way as many of us would have progressed through shared housing at university or early in our career.

### **Some of the key lessons we have learnt:**

- Projects work where our partners are able to provide the solution as well as owning the problem.
- People who the projects are trying to help need to be ready for the challenge.
- Projects work when we match the offer to the moment and to the right person.
- Public policy has a huge role to play in contributing to the success or otherwise of our work.

Whilst bringing attention to some of the areas we work in, we also have an ambition to do more, to help address and overcome further social injustices, to positively affect more lives, and to work with innovative like-minded partners that can help us achieve this. We are always interested to hear new project ideas. I encourage further conversations around the issues addressed by this report; and invite debate and action both with policy makers and with new and existing partners.





# **Rebuilding Shattered Lives: new approaches to women's homelessness**

**Howard Sinclair, Chief Executive, St Mungo's Broadway**



## Rebuilding shattered lives: new approaches to women's homelessness

One of my ambitions for St Mungo's Broadway is to provide a strong voice for all homeless people and people at risk of homelessness. That includes a significant but often overlooked group - the quarter of our residents who are women.

Why focus on women? Because too often they are let down by the 'system'. We know that women who are homeless are some of the most marginalised people in our society. Their homelessness often follows repeated experiences of violence and abuse, separation from children, mental ill health, substance use and more. And the needs and aspirations of homeless women have often been overlooked both with regards to homelessness policy and provision.

We know too that homeless women need support that enables them to deal with these past experiences and to recover. But this support is rare.

Women make up a growing proportion of people who are homeless. The stats are that 12% of rough sleepers <sup>1</sup> in London last year were women. Over half of our female clients have experienced domestic violence; 19% were abused as a child (compared to 5% and 8% of men). Almost half of our clients are mothers but 79% of these have had their children taken into care or adopted. They are more likely than men to have mental health problems - 70% of our female clients compared to 59% of men. Over a third (36%) have been to prison, and a quarter have been, or are currently, involved in prostitution. <sup>2</sup>

Despite their different needs, women are expected to "fit into" services essentially designed for the majority, men. Our report on women's homelessness, *Rebuilding Shattered Lives*, <sup>3</sup> shows that women recover more quickly in women only services. However, Homeless Link <sup>4</sup> report that the proportion of services targeted at women fell from 12% to 8% between 2012 and 2013. There were also large falls in the proportion of services aimed at prison leavers and services supporting people with mental health problems. The risk of women becoming even more marginalised in our services grows as the public purse gets tighter.

We developed our first women's strategy in 2011, concerned that women tended to make slower progress through our services than men. This includes training for staff covering topics including pregnancy, sexual health, supporting women involved in prostitution, domestic and sexual violence and more.



Women now make faster progress towards recovery than before the Strategy was implemented: 82% make progress in their mental wellbeing compared to 50% previously, and 75% in their substance use compared to 55%.<sup>5</sup>

### **Chrysalis Project in collaboration with Commonweal Housing**

An important part of our work with women has been at the excellent Chrysalis Project with Commonweal Housing in Lambeth, South London. Chrysalis works with homeless women who are involved in prostitution, and who have a substance use problem: problems which are interlinked with homelessness. The fact that the Chrysalis Project remains pioneering shows how nonsensical the approach to commissioning homelessness services for women is.

The first stage of Chrysalis is a high support accommodation project run by St Mungo's Broadway. This aims to provide women with stability to move towards recovery, or consider exiting prostitution. When women are ready, they move into a St Mungo's Broadway semi independent project, with continuing key worker support. The final phase involves moving into one of the seven Commonweal transitional move on properties, with floating key worker support.

There are three vital elements to the success of Chrysalis:

- The first is it recognises that homeless women have particular needs and is designed with these in mind. Specifically it recognises the need to identify and support issues of prostitution.

- The second is the role of partnership working, including multi agency support. There is a strong relationship between St Mungo's Broadway and Chrysalis but also with the Council, local health services, the police, Job Centre Plus and more. Lambeth also uses Multi Agency Case Conferences (MARACs), more commonly used to manage high risk offenders and cases of domestic violence, to support women involved in prostitution who are particularly at risk. These bring together a range of professionals working with women involved in prostitution to develop opportunities for joint work. We believe this approach could be adopted more widely to support vulnerable homeless women.





- The third element is leadership. In *Rebuilding Shattered Lives*, we call for national and local leadership on women's homelessness. The approach taken in Lambeth to working with women involved in prostitution demonstrates how this leadership can create innovative services. Lambeth recognises prostitution as violence against women,<sup>6</sup> and is, therefore, committed to an approach that supports women to exist prostitution. The Chrysalis Project is funded as part of this strategy.

The 'Lambeth model' sits in stark contrast with the more traditional enforcement based approaches which see women involved in prostitution as 'the problem' rather than as victims of violence and abuse. It allows for commissioning which offers effective support to women who are too often excluded. We want to see more councils taking this approach, including to tackle women's homelessness. Women who are homeless have been let down again and again. Services which fail to understand their needs risks pushing them further from recovery. There is an urgent need for more innovative services which are designed with women's needs in mind; for more cooperation between agencies which work with women with complex needs; and for leadership in tackling women's homelessness.

### Client experiences of the Chrysalis Project

"I would say everything they have done is spot on. Everything, the way they manage everything. They don't take over your time but they set things for you to do so that you get back into the swing of having things to do."

**Jane, Service User**

"I have now been (in the Commonweal flats) since January of this year. Ten months and it's the best thing that's happened! In here it has given me back my independence properly. That's the best thing that has ever happened to me, I would never change it."

**Amy, Service User**

1 - Broadway (2014) Chain: Street to Home Annual Report 1st April 2012 – 31st March 2013 [http://www.broadwaylondon.org/CHAIN/Reports/S2h2013/Street-to-home-report-2012\\_13.pdf](http://www.broadwaylondon.org/CHAIN/Reports/S2h2013/Street-to-home-report-2012_13.pdf)

2 - II statistics for St Mungo's Broadway clients taken form the St Mungo's Client Needs Survey 2013

3 - Hutchinson, S, Page, A and Sample, E (2014) *Rebuilding Shattered Lives: the final report St Mungo's* <http://rebuildingshatteredlives.org/read-the-report/>

4 - Homeless Link (2013) *Survey of needs and provision 2013* [http://homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/SNAP%202013%20Final%20180413\\_2.pdf](http://homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/SNAP%202013%20Final%20180413_2.pdf)

5 - Hutchinson, S, Page, A and Sample, E (2014) *Rebuilding Shattered Lives: the final report St Mungo's* <http://rebuildingshatteredlives.org/read-the-report/>

6 - Lambeth Prostitution Strategy, 2010-2013 <http://moderngov.lambeth.gov.uk/documents/s20811/4b%20Final%20Draft%20Prostitution%20Strategy%20V5%20Dec09.pdf>



# **The crisis of compensation for miscarriages of justice victims**

**Alison Lamb, Chief Executive,  
Royal Courts of Justice Advice Bureau**

## The crisis of compensation for miscarriages of justice victims

Our organisation, Royal Courts of Justice Advice Bureau (a CAB) has delivered the Miscarriage of Justice Support service (MJSS) since 2002. The purpose of the Service is to provide advice and support to Miscarriages of Justice victims who are referred to the Service by the Criminal Cases Review Commission.

We provide practical support including assistance in obtaining housing, state benefits, and medical advice. And importantly, in practically all cases we also provide psychological and psychiatric support.

Because victims of a miscarriage are not considered to be offenders, they do not receive the statutory provision delivered to other prisoners on release by the National Offender Management Service. This puts victims of a miscarriage of justice at a disadvantage and our Support Service was set up to address this loophole.

On top of this, a further injustice has been added, where recent legislative revisions make it increasingly difficult for individuals to claim compensation. From our experience of working with MJSS clients, compensation acknowledges and gives recognition to an individual's suffering and the wrong which has been done to them. The payment of compensation is the closest they will come to receiving an apology from the State. MJSS clients see compensation as a necessary means of closure on this traumatic period of their life.

So the effect on an individual when they are told they are unlikely to be eligible for compensation is then great distress, in turn exacerbating the trauma that they have suffered already as a result of their wrongful imprisonment. Such disappointment inevitably causes a seriously adverse effect on their ability to assimilate back into society.

The negative impact of a non-award of compensation will have on an individual may actually impede their ability to live independently. They may see their financial situation as insurmountable.

We consulted 40 of our existing clients and found that whilst the majority lived in the family home or had tenancies prior to imprisonment, on leaving prison they were homeless. Many Miscarriages of Justice Victims have no accommodation on release and are dependent upon the local authority for assistance.

When a prisoner is released they have to present themselves at the homelessness unit of the authority they have chosen to reside in. An interview takes place and a subsequent investigation into the individual's homelessness application. There has been an increase in local authorities deciding that miscarriages of justice victims are not deemed to be in priority need and are not vulnerable enough, despite being furnished with the supporting relevant information. Individuals are expected to find their own accommodation, a daunting task for a traumatised individual that has been incarcerated for a number of years and has no idea as to how the housing system works.

Commonweal approaching us with a proposal to conducting research to identify the impact housing has on individuals well-being and confidence was highly welcome. Together we came up with a scheme we named Libra. The vision was for Commonweal to provide housing for MJSS clients, and thereby offer them a secure environment which would allow them to progress in other areas of their life.

Unfortunately, due largely to the likely lack of compensation as a result of the Government's latest legislative changes, the Libra project was bought to an early end. As without this award, it is not possible to provide miscarriage victims with the long-term sustainable housing solution the scheme had intended.

However there had been some initial success, as illustrated in the case study below, which we had hoped to replicate before changes in legislation came into effect.

Some victims of miscarriages of justice face homelessness, so the MJSS and Commonweal will continue to highlight the need to ensure that the homelessness regulations and guidance, and those local authorities that have to implement it, recognise the trauma and the exceptional circumstances that such wrongful incarceration creates. And without state and often family support many have nowhere to turn.

### Case study

The first beneficiary \*Harry - a young man of 26 who was in prison for four years from the age of 18 before finally having his conviction quashed some years ago. Since then the lack of a clear housing and support pathway has meant frequent moves and constantly having to rebuild new support links with other services.

Commonweal were committed to assisting Harry and worked with us at each development stage. As an MJSS victim he was plagued with housing problems since his release, as due to his age found himself sharing accommodation with others who were not conducive to his assimilation back into the community. Commonweal threw him a life line by accommodating him in a flat in an area where he felt safe, and consequently he has a much more positive outlook on his future. He has found employment and is attending evening classes for his self-development, and continues to succeed in other areas of his life. He is extremely grateful to Commonweal for helping him enter a new chapter in his life.

\*Name has been changed.

## **Women with multiple needs: breaking the cycle**

- **Morag MacDonald, Director  
(Social Research and Evaluation Unit),  
Birmingham City University**
- **Joy Doal MBE, Project Director, Anawim**
- **Gail Walters, Head of Community Engagement,  
Midland Heart Housing Association**



## Women with multiple needs: breaking the cycle

The Street to Home project, funded by the EU Daphne programme,\* analyses the current provision of accommodation and accompanying support to women with experience of domestic violence and abuse. Drawing on literature and interviews with a range of stakeholders and service users - the project details the experiences of the various individuals and agencies involved, the challenges faced, and implications of current policy. We have been engaged with this project for the last twelve months or so, we along with a number of partners from both the UK and the EU.

For this piece we concentrate on the UK aspect of the research, which explored the lack of clear housing pathways that are accompanied by much needed integrated social support for women with multiple needs. These can include overlapping issues such as unemployment, substance abuse, experience of domestic violence and mental health needs.

### Partnership working

We conducted an evaluation of a joint initiative in Birmingham between a social housing provider Midland Heart, and a women's centre Anawim, to address this concern. This partnership grew from recognition that an informal agreement between the two parties could benefit both the women they serve and the two service providers. Evaluation of this joint initiative revealed that women who were obtaining tenancies through the scheme strongly believed that safe and secure accommodation had assisted in their progress towards a more stable life. All of the women interviewed as part of the evaluation were keen to stress that the ongoing support from Anawim had helped them to turn their lives around and provided the stability that they needed to maintain their tenancies.

Many of these women are separated from their children as a result of their chaotic lifestyles. They face the challenge of regaining custody of their children when stability has been established which often involves having permanent, safe and secure accommodation. This can be a catch 22 situation where they are unable to get custody of their children until they have suitable accommodation but can't get suitable housing because they don't have custody of their children.

The partnership between Anawim and Midland Heart is also cost effective. Yet the funding for women's centres is not secure and fundraising is a constant task to ensure survival.

There is also evidence to suggest that women's centres have a key role to play in reducing reoffending and provide a better option than sending women to prison on short sentences. Instead, community sentences provided by women's centres linked to housing providers would provide a better solution. This option would increase the opportunity for women to access support for their multiple needs while keeping them in the community.

There is a significant body of existing literature in the United Kingdom that identifies housing as a crucial factor in helping vulnerable women to address their multiple needs. The literature highlights the need for integrated housing and social support services for vulnerable women with experience of violence and abuse. It also demonstrates the important link between accommodation and provision of support services, as well as commenting on the challenges of providing social support as a result of current policy changes and funding cuts. The evaluation detailed above and other research carried out as part of the wider project has indicated that there are pockets of good practice that seek to address this concern. Such good practice is currently unable to thrive for a number of reasons.

### **Government policy is a key driver for change and changes in policy have had a huge impact over recent years:**

#### **The impact of government spending cuts**

The election of the new coalition government in 2010 with an agenda to vastly reduce government spending has created an unprecedented degree of uncertainty and concern for supporting vulnerable women. Proposed and gradually implemented cuts in public spending are putting pressure on the services that can be provided. The key policies of concern relating to housing are the changes to the benefit system, including 'Universal Credit', the 'Bedroom Tax' and Benefit caps. Supporting vulnerable women must be placed in a context of national and local policy change. Since 2010, with the change in government, there have been significant changes in national policy and approach. Of particular concern is the pressure that would be placed on services if a proposed benefit cap comes into force and how this will affect women using refuge services.

#### **Threat to essential service provision**

Recent reports highlight more general cuts in funding to services for women at risk of domestic violence: even the little support already available is under threat. Existing gaps in service provision are unlikely to be filled and there will be a reduction in available services. One possible consequence of the cuts is that women who suffer violence will find themselves increasingly alone. The overall impact that will have on their health and wellbeing is immeasurable.



## Recommendations:

There are many recommendations that have arisen from this evaluation and the wider research. However, the ones that stand out as fundamental are the need for:

**Integrated service delivery:** Women's Centres like Anawim demonstrate what works for this group of women: different service providers come to the centre and communication is effective as workers are located in one place and can easily share information. Services work better because women feel safe and have established a trusting relationship with Centre workers.

- Recommendation: The public sector should take responsibility to ensure that women's centres are properly resourced.

**Children in care:** The Re-Unite\* project has been successful in getting children out of care and re-united with their mothers following their release from Prison. Re-Unite, a Commonwealth replication model, is delivered in Birmingham as part of the partnership between Anawim and Midland Heart. Threats to its success can be due to government policy such as the under occupancy charge introduced by the UK Coalition Government in 2013. Although emergency funds are available to local authorities in the UK, these are often underspent.

- Recommendation: local authority housing and other social housing providers need to review their current allocation policy in respect of women seeking to be re-united with their children.
- Recommendation: local authorities need to review the use of discretionary housing benefit to mediate against the effects of the under occupancy charge for women seeking to be reunited with their children.

**Ongoing support needs:** Even if local authorities change their allocation policies, many of the women require additional support before, during and after moving, in order to manage transition. The women interviewed stressed the importance of knowing that support will still be available when they have moved into a property with their children.

- Recommendation: Continuing support needs to be funded adequately and requires children and family workers to mediate, protect and offer training in areas such as parenting skills.

The foundations required to enable women with multiple needs to make progress are at best difficult to access and at worst unavailable.





What is required to meet the housing and support needs of women with multiple needs is a women centered holistic approach that provides one stop access to social support that includes health, addiction, community sentences including probation officers and housing. The cuts to Supporting People budgets threaten this.

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\* The EU Daphne programme provides funding to contribute to the protection of children, young people and women against all forms of violence and attain a high level of health protection, well-being and social cohesion.

\* Re-Unite project is one of Commonweal Housings flagship projects, it was set up to re-unite mothers with their children on release from prison. Re-Unite was developed to demonstrate that mothers and children who have been separated by imprisonment can be successfully re-united and indeed, thrive when obstacles are removed and when timely support is provided. The approach was originally piloted in South London and is now being replicated across the country.

Re-Unite provides both suitable housing and an intense package of support that empowers women to live independent lives and so reduces their likelihood of re-offending, and to ensure the children of these women have the best future possible. [www.re-unite.org.uk](http://www.re-unite.org.uk)



# **The need for a commonsense approach to job sanctions**

**Bill Tidnam, Director of Operations, Thames Reach**

## The need for a commonsense approach to job sanctions

In a DWP press release about sanctioning – the process of suspending benefits for people who are judged not to be doing enough to find work, Esther McVey MP said:

*“This government has always been clear that in return for claiming unemployment benefits jobseekers have a responsibility to do everything they can to get back into work. We are ending the something for nothing culture.*

*People who are in a job know that if they don't play by the rules or fail to turn up in the morning, there might be consequences, so it's only right that people on benefits should have similar responsibilities. We always make the rules very clear – it's only right that there is a penalty if people fail to play by them.”*

In the same press release we are told that while the number of sanctions is increasing under the new tighter regime, the number of people sanctioned for refusing employment, leaving a job, or getting the sack, has dropped, pointing to the success of this “tough but fair” approach.

### Two stories can illustrate what lies behind these figures:

**The first** concerns my son Fred who was receiving Job Seekers Allowance until recently, after leaving school. He's 19 and lives at home, and when he was claiming was full of contempt for his Job Centre plus advisor, who, he felt, knew little of him and his dreams, and was in no position to advise him on a suitable career. This contempt for what he regarded as the petty and punitive bureaucracies of the benefit system combined with a degree of late teenage disorganisation, led him to quickly falling foul first of sanction threats, and then of a six week sanction. In his eyes this predictable chain of events had the effect of confirming his negative relationship with a system that had barred him from higher education by introducing ever higher tuition fees and student loans, and had now deprived him of his income despite his genuine and confidence sapping attempts to find suitable employment.

On the other hand, it did focus his job seeking efforts and he quickly found (poorly) paid work in a pub, and has benefited from having a bit of money, but probably more from the structure and involvement that runs alongside work. Long term employment plans are not his primary concern just now and he's doing OK.

So, on the whole, it's a win for Esther McVey; 'consequences' working positively to reinforce tough messages that are ultimately positive for those they are aimed at. He's no closer to finding a home to share with friends in an increasingly overheated London housing market, but that's a different problem, with causes that are wider than (although influenced by) the benefits system.

**The other story** concerns Juline. Juline volunteers with Thames Reach, helping to run the reception at one of our buildings. She has had a difficult life: she's had some problems with drink and drugs, but her main issue has been depression, which started following a bereavement and which by the time we met her meant that she found it difficult to function at all outside her home.

She enrolled on our TRAVEL scheme which offers training and volunteer placements. Juline enjoyed volunteering and took on more, and was eventually volunteering for three days a week at two of our buildings, meeting and greeting the public and helping set up rooms for events. We benefitted from her time, and invested time and training in her, and she came out of herself. All was going well, until she told her Work Programme advisor that she was volunteering with us.

We're not completely clear about the chain of events, but it seems that her advisor had noticed that things were moving on in her life, and decided that she was ready for an unpaid work placement. When Juline told her about her volunteering with us she wrote to Juline's supervisor at Thames Reach asking for evidence that she really was volunteering. When she didn't receive a prompt reply (The supervisor was on holiday for a few days), she triggered the sanction process.

In some ways she was lucky, she had the support of an organisation who understands the way the system works, and we were able to support her to appeal and have her benefits reinstated within a couple of weeks. It didn't do much for her confidence though. She panicked at the prospect of losing income and possibly her home and stopped volunteering for us, although she's now back doing a day a week at a quieter scheme.

Juline played by the rules and turned up in the morning, but she was let down by a system that can seem arbitrary and punitive, and which pushed her away from rather than towards independence from benefits. Less of a win for the system.

So two very different examples of how the sanctioning regime has had an impact and the Juline story indicates how just a small amount of flexibility and commonsense can make an enormous difference to the life of a very disadvantaged person doing all they can to develop the skills and confidence to get back to work.

We recognise that public policy on this scale will always be a scythe rather than a scalpel, and that alongside the intended consequences, there is always the potential to create casualties. We can help prevent this. All we ask is that organisations like Thames Reach are treated as partners who, led by the expressed needs of the vast majority of our service users, are seeking ways of helping people become less dependent on benefits and finding work that is sustaining and brings dignity. Please work with us, not against us.

# **The true cost of immigration policy**

**Vaughan Jones, Chief Executive, Praxis**

## The true cost of immigration policy

It is nonsensical to allow immigration policy to create a crisis in homelessness. Immigration controls are widely understood to be an essential part of protecting the economy and security of nation states. It is a complex area which unfortunately is not helped by polarised and popularised debates in the political rhetoric fuelled by media interventions. Tough action and increasingly restrictive measures are in place. However, despite the popularity of tough talking, politicians and public appear to be united in their abhorrence of human trafficking and modern day slavery. If it were more widely known, there would be similar sympathy for children who are forced to make difficult lone journeys to escape violent situations. Some may remember the outrage which followed 'Cathy Come Home' - a BBC drama following a young family's difficult journey in dealing with the British welfare system and would, no doubt, be shocked to hear that families with young children can be sleeping out in cars, as Cathy did.

It is important to de-link the plight of very vulnerable migrants from the wider discourse in relation to the pros and cons of migration. Vulnerable migrants are people who have been forcibly displaced through war, conflict, extreme poverty or climate change. They are those who beside their status as newcomers have other health or social problems. They are refugees, asylum seekers, refused asylum seekers, survivors of trafficking, gender based violence, or are young without family. They are open to abuse and exploitation, physical, emotional and financial.

There are a number of ways in which migrants can become vulnerable to homelessness. They may be an asylum seeker whose claim has been refused but they are unable to return to their own country. They may be awaiting the outcome of an appeal. Their visa may have expired but their circumstances have altered which either prevent return or cause them to need to stay. Their status may be dependent on a marriage which has descended into violence.

Many visas contain the words 'no recourse to public funds'. This means that the holder of the visa does not have entitlement to benefits, to accessing education or training or social housing which is funded from the public purse. The crude term 'illegal immigrant' is unhelpful. Many people who are here legitimately do not have access to public funds.

Some with no recourse to public funds are also not allowed to work. The new immigration act requires landlords to check the status of those applying for private lettings. They have limited access to health care beyond primary care. It is difficult at present to know how many people are affected by these circumstances but we can be sure that the numbers are not insignificant.

This society has safety nets in place for the most vulnerable. There is the benefit system, homeless persons' legislation and the National Health Service, none of which were available for \*Adeola, a young woman from Nigeria who recently came to Praxis. Her parents had sold their possessions to pay for their child to attend university in the UK. They paid a trusted friend to acquire the visa and paid him the university fees. Her 'uncle', however, did not bring her to live with him and his family as expected. Instead he raped her several times, forced her into prostitution and she was abused and tortured. On coming to Praxis she was very distressed, suffering post-traumatic stress disorder, homeless, destitute and pregnant.

Praxis has been working with a charitable foundation and major housing association to provide accommodation for people in her situation. As the conventional homelessness provisions were not initially open to her, she was able to access the Praxis temporary accommodation. The next crucial step was to bring her into the immigration system through assistance of an immigration lawyer who lodged an application for asylum. This gave her access to state support and put her on a pathway to settling in the UK. Praxis continues to provide support through our Family Care group, a mutual support group for women in similar circumstances.

The non-sense is to create a category of very vulnerable people for whom statutory services are able to divert their duty of care. It is common for women with children who present themselves at social services to be told that their children will be taken into care. This is a clear breach of the requirement in the overwhelming majority of cases to keep the family together in the best interests of the child. Advocacy is essential to ensure that the authorities exercise their duty under Section 17 of the Children's Act properly - they have a duty of care to families with children at risk from homelessness.

Praxis is working with Commonweal Housing to find new models of providing accommodation for these very vulnerable people. Social investors are willing to invest into Commonweal to allow them to purchase properties which will house families who are brought into the care of the social services. This will enable Praxis to provide a high level of advocacy and social support. It will also enable Praxis to expand the temporary accommodation units it has available for its clients.

### **Recommendations:**

There are many things which need to change to prevent the vulnerable from suffering more.

- There needs to be a nuanced discourse on social policy surrounding the needs of migrants.
- There needs to be training for front line staff in social services and housing departments.

- There needs to be an effective and coordinated civil society delivery mechanism incorporating adequate legal representation, temporary accommodation, including specialist accommodation and support for victims of gender based violence and pathways into legality and settlement or a genuinely choice-based returns policy.
- Legal Aid should cover immigration matters. Inefficiencies and delays in the processing of immigration cases should be curtailed.

Bringing sense into this non-sense requires the heat taken from the debate and a new warmth of compassion toward the vulnerable.





# **Renting is not a dirty word: solutions for London's housing crisis**

**Elizabeth Balgoban, Charity Governance Consultant**

## **Renting is not a dirty word: solutions for London's housing crisis**

The UK is obsessed with home ownership. It provides a strong sense of security and upward mobility. London is an unusual City with such high levels of home ownership. Renting is seen as a dead investment. That was then and we need to deal with now. Property prices, particularly in London are ridiculously high. Even shared equity, affordable housing requires the purchaser to have a deposit almost equivalent to an annual salary and an income twice that of the national average.

This has pushed the price of rented accommodation to eye-watering levels; single rooms with shared bathrooms at over £500 a month is not unusual. Social housing is so restricted that there are London boroughs with waiting lists that will take years to clear. Of course they will never be cleared as new people become eligible all the time.

One voluntary sector project I know of has been working to support families living in temporary accommodation for over a decade; I was a little startled when they told me that they have been working with some families for over three years. Three years of living in temporary hostel accommodation with children is not only financially expensive but socially expensive. The children living in this situation do not have space to play, do homework or have friends over. Their parents do not have the option of putting them to bed and closing the door on them for a while. Living in cramped and stressed conditions does not lead to healthy lifestyles, physically or mentally.

There is another important step back this housing crisis creates – young adults cannot leave home. We have a generation that is being kept as adolescents as they remain at home, with home comforts and no real understanding of how to fend for themselves. No parent wants to see their child struggle but at some point they have to grow up. Children I used to babysit are now rapidly heading towards 30 and many are still at home living as teenagers. Some claim they are saving to buy their first home, others that they just cannot afford the rents on their salaries. This is the generation I have to trust will be able to pay for my old age.

We know that the answer is to build more affordable housing, both for sale and rent. There is some movement in that direction, more so in the private for sale developments. The rental and affordable sector, particularly for social housing, is lagging behind as these mixed developments concentrate on the higher value private sales. This lag leaves the socially deprived on the waiting lists and living in accommodation that deteriorates before their eyes.

We need some new solutions as well as the generally agreed answer of more new housing. The work of Commonweal - for whom I sit on their Advisory Panel - is trying to find some of the new solutions especially for those overlooked by mainstream policy.

### Recommendations

Whist there is no simple solution; here I have outlined a number of ideas that could work:

**1. Rent control:** London needs rent control to ensure a fair rent is charged for the property type and size. It would also take some of the price inflation out of the market by reducing the number of properties bought as buy to let.

**2. A special purchase tax for overseas buyers:** This could help reduce the number of London developments that are sold off-plan, as an investment for overseas buyers; and often then sit empty for most of the year once built.

**3. London Housing Benefit levels should reflect the market rental rates in London:** The one-size fits all benefit cap does not reflect that fact that the poor in London do not set the rent rates but still have to pay them.

**4. Development targets:** The Mayor of London must stick to the development targets for affordable rented and shared ownership. This would help ensure that families in inappropriate and expensive temporary accommodation do not end up living there for years. In addition the developers need to build on both fronts at the same time: for each private property for sale on the development one affordable rented property should be built at the same time.

**5. Parents should charge rent to their adult children at near the market rates:** I know this one is difficult for most parents to consider but it would have the effect of making their children realise the real cost of being an adult. Even if the parents decide to put half aside as a moving out gift to help with a deposit for a rental or first property there is an important lesson for our younger generation in how to manage their money.

**6. Schemes such as Peer Landlords should be supported and rolled out further:** This is a Commonweal Housing supported project that offers affordable and supportive shared housing for those at risk of homelessness. The supportive model aims to build confidence and skills for sharing whilst at the same time having a focus on employment, education and training.

Whist there should never be an expectation that someone else will always be there to pick up the bill, we must not lose the safety net of the well-functioning welfare state. Without a decent roof over your head it is difficult to move your life forward. Without appropriate accommodation for all sections of society, London can-not be expected to function to its full potential.



# Concluding Comments

**Ashley Horsey, Chief Executive, Commonweal Housing**

## **What this report tells us and what we will do with it**

According to the Government's latest Rough Sleeping statistics<sup>1</sup> there are an estimated 2,414 rough sleepers in England. However, as illustrated by this report, the problem is in-fact much wider. Homelessness or the threat of becoming homeless also affects those in temporary, unsuitable and unsustainable accommodation.

This report shows that whilst there are diverse and often complex factors which can lead to homelessness, a key unifying factor in all the cases highlighted is that possible solutions are being threatened by ineffective public policies. As a result, too many people are made to suffer unnecessarily.

There are many illustrations of innovative projects and solutions that are working to help vulnerable people; however the challenges posed by the social policy landscape are making it increasingly difficult to effectively deliver these solutions.

Our contributors to this report have succinctly highlighted just a few of the conundrums or clashing policies that make their job and more importantly the lives of those they work with harder:

- Funding cuts and a welfare system that are failing women with multiple and complex needs.
- Job Centre sanctions negatively impacting those trying to secure a job.
- Housing policy that denies children the opportunity to live with their mothers working against attempts to address reoffending.
- Immigration policy that leaves vulnerable migrants seeking refuge in the UK without a means for survival.
- A courts system that denies compensation to those wrongfully imprisoned by the State.
- The high cost of London living and need to consider alternative options.
- The need for homelessness services to specifically support women.

As an independent charity Commonweal are determined to keep working with partners trying to work a way through some of these systemic nonsenses – highlighting policy clashes but more importantly trying to find solutions.

As our Chair Fiona Mactaggart says in her foreword to this report, those that established Commonweal about 10 years ago recognised the central importance of housing in addressing social injustices in the UK. For most of the injustices and the client groups helped by Commonweal and our partners, rarely will housing be the solution in itself. However, what is clear from the experience of the initiatives and models supported by the charity to date is that whilst it may not be the whole solution, appropriate, available and timely housing is vital in helping the whole solution to be available.

There are a number of abiding lessons learnt by Commonweal to date, which we believe are also vital for anyone else seeking to find housing based solutions to some of the social injustices facing people in our society today.

**Right place right time:** For those on a complex journey having the right support, the right option available at the right time makes all the difference. We have found time and again with our projects that people need to be ready, they need to be carefully selected. This opens up the accusation of cherry picking or only helping the easy cases. In reality what it actually means is being clear on what support will make the most impact at any given time or point on someone's journey and then shaping preceding support to get people ready not abandoning those that are not ready yet.

**Being flexible:** We tend to see housing - the housing ladder - as a one way linear progression, a conveyor belt, which if envisaged that way can seem a daunting image for most of us - no flexibility, no real options to change your mind or go off at a tangent almost restricting your own free will. How many of us with mortgages have ever felt that sensation of being trapped? Isn't the same true about the fear of giving up a tenancy for fear of not getting another one or turning down an offer (or allocation) of housing for fear of burning bridges?

Then think how daunting or even suffocating such rigidity may seem to those working hard to battle other demons in their lives or just starting out in the adult world with no hard and fast view of where you might be in 12 months let alone 5 years?

For the women in the Chrysalis project part of the reason they are not failing in their tenancies is the understanding that they can - if necessary - go backwards in housing terms returning to the hostel if the independent flat is not working for them at that stage without fear of having failed and being off the programme.

In the Peer Landlord houses a number of those housed had returned to shared housing from independent flats of their own some because of cost and affordability, some for company and addressing concerns of loneliness or isolation.



**Stability and time to prove:** We learnt early on that traditional 2-3 year project funding timescales are difficult. You might know very early on if something is not going to work as you planned – our Miscarriages of Justice project is a case in point – but do you really know if a solution has truly worked after a year or two of full operation? Were you lucky with the first cohort of tenants? Does the model still stack up after churn and possible void periods? Too many short term funded projects can come with too high outcome expectations. We are told time and again by our partners that Commonweal's openness and willingness to know about things that are *not* working, in addition to those there are, is not only refreshing within the sector it also helps them to better find sustainable solutions.

Commonweal recognises the fortunate position we are in as an independent funder to provide that stability and to give a bit more time to our partners to test models and to not be afraid of failure. We believe that is vital – we would hope that others (charitable funders or public sector commissioners) could do more to provide more stability.

**Learning lessons:** Asking the question why is important; but being willing and able to change is more important when the why question throws up a difficult or negative answer. Where it is found that policies are not working as intended, and are not protecting those in most need, there is a need for policy makers to address this and to change them. This is imperative to ensure that social policy supports individuals in overcoming difficulties and does not become the reason that people continue to suffer.

Getting someone housed is important: but for many it is not the end but the start of the next chapter of issues to be addressed. What we hope, as a result of the models and initiatives delivered by our partners and supported by Commonweal, is that they can then face the same issues - the same housing and accommodation-stress - that faces the majority in this country with the same confidence and likelihood of being able to sort it out as anyone else. They are no longer defined by or hindered by who they once were.

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 1 DCLG - Rough sleeping in England: autumn 2013 (published Feb 2014). This figure is made up of snapshot data and estimates taken by all the local authorities.





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## Commonweal Housing

Commonweal works to develop housing solutions to social injustices, capture learning and achieve replication of proven success.

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