

Background

The strategic migration partnership had identified housing issues for migrants as a significant regional concern – including low level nuisance issues because of overcrowded accommodation, through to rough sleeping of A8 nationals due to their not being eligible for benefits in the event of their losing work and a lack of consistency in housing departments when assessing migrants' rights to housing.

We looked across the region at where good practice existed in order to share with partners who are just beginning to encounter difficulties, and where appropriate, fed back intractable problems to relevant national agencies.

Partnership working with Peterborough City Council

Peterborough City Council's Homelessness Prevention team were identified as an example of good practice, having:

- established a reconnection to country of origin service using an external provider and then taken it and run the service in-house,
- substantially reduced what had been a sizeable rough sleeper population in the city, which had attracted adverse national attention, from 58 in April 2010 to 16 in November 2010
- begun a pilot partnership service with UKBA to enforce removal of those entrenched rough sleepers who would not engage with the range of offers made to end their street homelessness voluntarily.

However, before inviting someone from the team to speak at a regional conference on the issue, we needed to visit the service to see first hand how it operated in practice, and to explore 'the offer' in more detail.

The service

The team is made up of 4 professionals whose goal is to reduce numbers of rough sleepers in Peterborough, who prior to the reconnection offer being available had no option but leave A8 nationals to stay street homeless.

They engaged with the voluntary sector, which in some cases had been misguidedly been supporting street homelessness by providing food and temporary shelter. This goodwill and effort was redirected to providing packed food and haircuts for the journey to the country of origin and the provision of clean, smart clothes.

The multi-lingual outreach team visit a range of places used as gathering places by the street homeless, and during our visit, attended St Theresa's day centre. They first identify those who are entitled to services because of having been correctly registered for and completed a year's work and then assist with form filling, so as to

connect them with services which get them off the street. They also offer cv skills' workshops so as to get street homeless work of some kind, to help them become 'work ready' in order to break the cycle of worklessness which the team has seen leads to substance addiction, further embedding the rough sleeping culture.

It is apparent that this is a slow process; offering help, building trust, gradually making people aware that they cannot sustain this way of life in the long term, what the options are to break the cycle and then finally people accepting the reconnection offer when other options have not worked. In all their dealings, the abiding principle was to treat people with dignity, so that whatever choice they make about their future, they can take the next step with pride.

The team has built relationships with relevant embassies, so that once a reconnection offer has been accepted, there are established processes with the embassies who supply travel documents quickly.

During the visit, I did also attend the partnership meeting with UKBA, where the enforcement route was reviewed. In part, the success of the voluntary reconnection offer is due to there being a consequence to not engaging with the service, and that if all options are exhausted, reconnection is preferable to enforced removal, as it allows people to return with dignity, as they have the clothes, the haircut, the packed lunch and would have spent a few nights in a hostel prior to being returned, so as to be rested and clean too.

When discussing the cost of running the service as compared to the cost of sustaining a population of street homeless, PCC evaluated the total number of touch points in the city where the street homeless present for service – 31 in all – and every engagement with every touch point comes at a cost which continues without end. However, the cost of delivering the reconnection service cannot be calculated simply by adding up the number of people reconnected and multiplying this by the cost of their fares – the multi-lingual outreach staff can work for months with an individual before the reconnection offer is accepted, but during that time, all the other options available are eliminated until return becomes a fait accompli.

The regional conference on A8s sleeping rough

Sarah was invited to participate in the regional conference which took place in January 2011. Several local authorities had their concerns about the rising street homeless population and wanted to learn how Peterborough had achieved the results it had. Sarah was scheduled to speak with a representative from CRI, who would offer the perspective from a rural service, and also with a UKBA representative, to explain how the 'end to end' service works.

In addition, Sarah ran two workshops where she talked about how to deliver the service. Some of the local authorities present did have their own reconnection service, but none were able to offer the final sanction of enforced removal, as the pilot in Peterborough is the only one of its kind in the east. It was clear from the scale of the problem in the local authorities present with a reconnection service that the entrenched rough sleepers presented them with the greatest difficulty – without the partnership pilot with UKBA, their reconnection figures were very much smaller than Peterborough's, but their entrenched numbers were not that much fewer (between 6-10 in most cases).

A key finding from the conference was how effective early interventions are – once people become embedded in the lifestyle, it is much harder to move them. By

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providing the service they do in Peterborough, with the outreach team attending the rough sleeper touch points on a daily basis and having the enforced removal as a sanction, there are higher levels of engagement with the service than other local authorities are seeing and crucially this prevents street homeless from becoming embedded.

At the event, one of Sarah's partner speakers from CRI was called away, so she was left with a workshop and presentation to deliver single-handedly. The feedback from the event was very good, – and Sarah was rated as 'excellent' by 13 delegates and 'good' by the remaining 5 who completed their evaluation sheets. These are some of the comments recorded:

- Interesting and useful
- Excellent day, extremely informative and vast information to take back
- Bottom line is if they don't want to go we can't make them
- Interesting, eye opening

Conclusion

The Peterborough model is the delivery model which is the envy of local authorities in the east of England! As a result of Peterborough's contribution to the regional event, we have fed back to UKBA that the enforced removal powers available to the local immigration team working in Peterborough should be extended to other areas to enable them to intervene early and to prevent street homeless groups from becoming embedded.

Providing the homelessness prevention service does have a cost attached – but there is a financial cost of servicing people as they present at the touch points over a prolonged period, in addition to the cost in terms of community tension if the homeless group is allowed to sustain that way of living.

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