

Conservative Blueprint To Tackle Homelessness

The Conservative Party is committed to tackling homelessness in our society. We understand that in order to properly address this issue we must go beyond dealing with it purely as a problem of housing and instead accept the multi-faceted nature of homelessness.

The ideas and policies in this Statement have been worked on by colleagues from across Shadow Departments and meet with the approval of the Conservative Homelessness Foundation and its Advisory Panel made up of all the leading homelessness organisations in this country.

A cross-departmental approach

The problem

Homelessness is a complex issue and contrary to popular belief, it is rarely simply about whether someone has a roof over their head. Homelessness organisations report great frustration that they are unable to resolve even simple issues because no one within a relevant Government department believes that it is within their remit. A dialogue and solutions are therefore difficult to initiate.

The solutions

1 A future Conservative Government will work across Whitehall to ensure that policy is designed to help rather than hinder homeless people.

We will ensure in particular that homelessness is put firmly onto the agenda, not only for the Housing Minister, but also for the other relevant Whitehall departments which would currently include:

- Department for Work and Pensions
- Department of Health
- Ministry of Justice
- Ministry of Defence

These are the Government departments most often identified as having a role to play in tackling homelessness.

2 In preparation for Government we have established a Shadow Cabinet taskforce composed of the relevant Ministers in order to help better coordinate efforts to tackle homelessness.



Homelessness – why the problem needs urgent action

The extent of the problem

In May 2008 David Cameron and Grant Shapps launched the Conservative Homelessness Foundation at the HQ of Crisis in London. Since that time an Advisory Panel – made up of all the leading homelessness organisations – has been working with the Conservative Homelessness Foundation to map out the true extent of homelessness in the UK today and to identify policy solutions.

With the number of people sleeping rough on the nation's streets officially just 483 (artificially low because of a bracketing-down and other counting errors¹), the problem of homelessness very much exists in short-term accommodation like Hostels, B&B and so called Sofa Surfing or living on other people's sofas.

Crisis estimates that a staggering 400,000 people are part of this country's so called hidden homeless² and even based on official Government statistics, last Christmas there were 130,000 homeless children living in England and Wales, twice that of 10 years earlier³.

Meanwhile the stock of Social Housing has all but silted up, with few people moving in and out, and as a result there are now 1.7 million families languishing on the housing waiting list⁴. Up 64% in the last ten years. Some of the more severe cases result in more homelessness.

Communities and Local Government

The solutions

1 In future the role of the Housing Minister to will be directed to coordination and less about introducing a myriad of small, confusing and sometimes contradictory initiatives to 'fix' the homelessness problem in isolation.

The crucial lesson for a Housing Minister should be to tackle homelessness not purely as a housing issue, but rather with a multi-disciplinary approach.

2 Fixing the Street Count. We will eliminate the practice of 'bracketing-down' the rough sleeper counts. This is where Local Authorities send in returns which estimate the numbers sleeping rough, Communities and Local Government automatically brackets any returns of between 0 to 10 (or 11 to 20, etc) down to zero (or the lowest number in the bracket). This leads to an underestimation of the number of people sleeping rough. We will end this distorting practice.

¹ Roughly Sleeping <http://www.shapps.com/reports>

² http://www.crisis.org.uk/policywatch/pages/hidden_homeless.html

³ There's No Place Like Home <http://www.shapps.com/reports>

⁴ Economist: http://www.economist.com/world/britain/displaystory.cfm?story_id=12070438



Work and Pensions

The problem

The benefit system is intended to help the most vulnerable people in their time of need. However, the current system is ill-equipped to deal with the needs of homeless people and can even be exacerbate their problems.

To claim a benefit you would normally need a National Insurance Number, proof of your identity (such as a birth certificate) and proof of income (such as your benefit book or wage slips)⁵. Homeless people who typically live incredibly chaotic lives do not always have this basic information, without which it is very difficult to start up a claim. The irony is that the people who most need support are therefore sometimes unable to access it. There are a range of Work and Pension related proposals that will help.

The solutions

1 Reform of the Housing Benefit System. During 2009 the Conservative Party will launch a review of Housing Benefit in order to seek to find ways to end the disincentive to work, whereby someone living in temporary accommodation finds that they are often worse off when they try to take up paid employment, because of the sudden drop off of their Housing Benefit claim.

2 A large homelessness charity, St Mungos, reports that just 4% of their residents are currently in paid employment. The same charity recalls that back in the 1980s, over 80% of their tenants were employed⁶. Our Welfare to Work programme which will pay voluntary bodies and others by results when they enable people to move from long term welfare into work for a sustained period. This will help to resolve homelessness since there is an established link between long-term employment and the ability to obtain and retain a home.

3 Lift restrictions on voluntary work when unemployed. We appreciate that getting back into the workplace requires a series of steps which include taking on responsibility and working to time scales and schedules. Undertaking voluntary work can help provide structure and meaning to someone's life, quite apart from the benefits of the good work done whilst volunteering. We will therefore review restrictions which currently make it difficult for the unemployed to participate in volunteering. A measure which would prove particularly helpful for those trapped in homelessness.

4 Finding alternatives to an address. We will review options for those without addresses to use other facilities to have important documents delivered safely and securely to them. Ideas such as including post office boxes or an equivalent in Job Centres that can be used by those without fixed addresses.

⁵ http://england.shelter.org.uk/get_advice/advice_topics/paying_for_a_home/other_benefits

⁶ Charles Fraser, Chief Executive of St Mungos.



Health

The problem

The homeless, especially those who rough sleep, often have particularly severe support needs. When they present at hospitals it is the perfect time to attempt to intervene in their lives in order to affect positive change⁷. The NHS is therefore in a unique position to assist and save both its own future time and money and improve life for the individual involved.

The Solutions

- 1** Mental Health and the Homeless. The homeless have a particularly high instance of mental health issues. In the future, we will ensure that autonomous providers of healthcare, including those involved with mental health, will be able to register their services with the NHS. This will enable greater provision of services for those most in need and allow organisations to work within the established framework of the NHS.⁸
- 2** Provision of Public Health Services. Under a Conservative Government there will be a new structure for public health services. Local directors, jointly appointed by PCTs and local authorities, will determine how funding for public health services will be spent. This will allow for a more flexible framework of funding, some of which could be directed towards homelessness organisations to assist them in their public health work.⁹
- 3** We will more closely link local GPs services to local homelessness and third sector organisations dealing with homelessness. In areas with particularly high instances of homelessness this is particularly important. With better access to out of hours services and day to day access to GPs many of those presenting in hospitals would be able to access primary care services which would otherwise be bypassed.

⁷ Discharged to no fixed abode. <http://www.shapps.com/reports>

⁸ NHS Autonomy and Accountability – Proposals for Legislation www.conservatives.com

⁹ Public Health: Our Priority, www.conservatives.com



Justice

The problem

'I have nowhere to live. At least if I commit a crime I've a roof over my head in prison'. This statement by a 32 year old male on remand typifies the problems faced by released prisoners. Over the last four years 78,197 prisoners have been released with nowhere to go. This is the equivalent to almost the entire current size of the prison population¹⁰.

Research has shown that a having access to stable accommodation can reduce re-offending by up to 20% by reducing the likelihood of so called 'bed and breakfast crime' where ex-prisoners re-offend in order to get a roof over their heads.¹¹

Emphasis needs to be placed not only on housing provision for those on release from prison, but what can be done to ensure that people don't lose their accommodation when taken into custody. It is estimated that around a third of prisoners lose their housing as a result of imprisonment.

The Solutions

1 To look into ways of reducing the revolving door from prison release to homelessness and often back into prison again, the report written by the Conservative Housing Minister has proposed a number policies to help prisoners when they come out of prison get back on their feet.

2 A Conservative Government would change how prisoners are paid for work they carry out in prison. Earnings from prison work would be split three ways: over half would go into a Victim's Fund, to compensate victims of crime; a small amount would be available to spend in prison, as at present; the rest would be held in trust for the prisoner and paid out in instalments after release. We envisage that some of this could be used to secure accommodation for prisoners on their release, particularly in the private rented sector.¹²

¹⁰ Prison Break Report 6th March 2008 www.shapps.com/reports

¹¹ Prison Break Report 6th March 2008 www.shapps.com/reports

¹² Prisons with a Purpose:

http://www.conservatives.com/~media/Files/Green%20Papers/Prisons_Policy_Paper.ashx?dl=true



Defence

The problem

Recent Conservative research has uncovered profound inadequacies in the support available to veterans. We believe that more should be done to help the most vulnerable Service leavers, particularly those leaving the Services early. In a research report published in June 2008 by the University of York's Centre for Housing Policy¹³ it was estimated that there were 1,100 non-statutory single homeless Veterans and approximately 2,500 ex-Service personnel in statutorily homeless families in London on any one night. Although successes have been claimed in this area in the past, these figures represent an unacceptable failure to support our nation's veterans.

A future Conservative Government will look at ways to improve Service leavers' access to social housing and temporary accommodation in England. Conservatives want to ensure that those returning from military service are able to train for new careers, find housing, and get the healthcare services they deserve. The report to David Cameron by The Military Covenant Commission, titled *Restoring the Covenant*, lays out our aspirations for the future in this regard.¹⁴

The Solutions

1 We will honour our armed forces by strengthening the Military Covenant¹⁵. With specific reference to Housing the Conservative Party will ensure that those leaving active military service will no longer return home to find that they are at the bottom of the housing needs register¹⁶.

¹³ Johnsen, S., Jones, A., Rugg, J. (2008). The Experience of Homeless Ex-Service personnel in London. York: Centre for Housing Policy

¹⁴ Military Covenant Commission

¹⁵ http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2008/09/Liam_Fox_Honouring_our_Armed_Forces.aspx

¹⁶ http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2008/10/Shapps_Labour_has_blocked_the_door_to_mobility.aspx