

DESIGNING OUT HOMELESSNESS

Sharon Thompson is deputy leader of Birmingham City Council and newly appointed deputy mayor of West Midlands Combined Authority. She experienced homelessness as a teenager – and tells the incoming government to ‘implement an effective housing strategy not just a homelessness strategy’.

Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states: ‘Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services.’

A home is assumed in Article 8 of the Human Rights Act 1998: ‘Everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence. There shall be no interference ... with the exercise of this right except ... in accordance with the law and as is necessary in a democratic society in the interests of ... public safety or the economic well-being of the country ... or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.’

However, for increasing numbers of people in this country, a home is not an assumption we can make. Homelessness is the ultimate exclusion, separating the person from the ability to enjoy their human rights.

Individual and structural factors drive homelessness and exclusion – we need to tackle both. We must create an inclusive universal domain which enables people to thrive and use their talents and skills. And we must provide compassionate responsive assistance to those who need it, at the earliest opportunity, to enable them to remain within the universal domain.

Homelessness should be the exception – not the preferred or intentional route to housing. But too often it is the default route in a system where need hugely outstrips supply and allocations systems are forced to focus on those in the most desperate circumstances.

What should we aspire to and plan for? An accessible, affordable, desirable housing offer which underpins our ability to live, work, earn and learn; to make a home, to be safe, to connect. Without that, the cycle of homelessness is perpetuated, and prevention becomes a short term gate-keeping measure delaying the often inevitable.

Homelessness is about economic inequality at all levels, with some communities and people, including women, those from Black, Asian and other minoritised communities, LGBTQ+ people, and young people, more exposed because of structural inequalities. It is about:

- policy and investment choices which prioritise short-term rescue services rather than tackling root causes

- poverty which creates an inability to meet your own and your family's needs
- power inequality and compliance with system expectations, employing deficit rather than asset-based approaches, instead of making the system inclusive for all.

We will always have a homelessness problem until we have a national housing and inclusion strategy and an implementation plan which meets household needs over the timeframe of successive parliaments. Otherwise, we will continue to patch up those most vulnerable to falling out of the system to make them fit to fight for tightly rationed resources.

In the West Midlands, our collective ambition is to 'design out homelessness'. This means ensuring that our mainstream services and systems are *INclusive* and keep people in homes, jobs, communities, education, and safe support. We mean intentional, perpetual prevention of the ultimate exclusion of homelessness.

We have taken a life-course approach using the Positive Pathway model, examining what we have in place and where gaps exist for children and families, young people, and older people, paying particular attention to those who are serially excluded.

Initially developed by St Basils to prevent youth homelessness, it has much wider relevance. It is the framework for our homelessness strategy in Birmingham as well as our West Midlands Combined Authority Designing out Homelessness strategy. The pathway model looks at five domains: universal prevention; targeted prevention and early help; crisis prevention; recovery and move on; and a sustainable home.

The framework enables each system to consider fundamental questions. What is our universal offer? What is in our universal space which all may access and experience, for example, in education, health services, housing, public services, community assets, public spaces, and employment. How successful is it? Who is likely to fall out and how do we prevent them from doing so? How do we use our collective resources such as finance, planning, regulation, assets, and powers to enhance the universal domain? Do we use them in a creative way to take a prevention-first approach or do we focus them on the point of crisis? What is mandatory and what is discretionary? The challenge for local authorities can be how to meet mandatory requirements without funnelling resources into crisis and how to lever-in wider contributions from other sectors and partners, making the whole greater than the sum of the parts.

It is a collaborative partnership approach which enables all sectors – public, business, voluntary and community – to consider what are our assets and how we make best use of them collectively to prevent crisis and optimise INclusion. Research shows that early spend is more effective than late spend, both socially and financially. So it is in our collective interests to move from a system of silo services (high access thresholds, generic approaches, and often multiple exclusions) to one where there are integrated, simple access routes, early intervention, and accessible, skilled, compassionate assistance. These keep people in the universal domain, reducing financial and social costs for all.

Our approach is based on the principle that we need to make the universal domain inclusive for everyone, including the most vulnerable. We need to move from a cycle of exclusion where each event makes the next more likely, to a cycle of Inclusion which keeps people in the universal space.

What does INclusion look like?

INclusion Education: Understand the underlying issues; offer unconditional support; keep the child in school; support the family; intensify targeted support where required in a respectful way.

INclusion Employment: Create pathways into employment for those furthest from the labour market; 'good work' for all including fair opportunities for ex-offenders; a housing offer to underpin work. Employers help those in their workforce who experience difficulties – including homelessness, domestic abuse, mental health issues – and provide access to confidential early help.

INclusion Welfare: Link universal credit to minimum income standards above destitution levels; realign housing benefits with housing costs; remove SAR for under 35s; reinstate Employment Maintenance Allowance; reclaim the meaning of social security.

INclusion Housing: Develop a national housing strategy not just a homelessness strategy; increase capital subsidy for social housing and make rents truly affordable to enable people to live, work, earn and learn; exclude affordability criteria in allocations policies for social housing; create a duty to collaborate to prevent and relieve homelessness; provide bespoke housing management and fund housing-related support.

INclusion Health and Social Care: Provide life course accessible health support; ensure that integrated care systems focus on keeping people in and that access to mental health support is part of the universal service. We need timely access to health and social care. Ensure transition to adulthood is a developmental transition not a service transition.

INclusion Community: Optimise social and community network support for people when allocating housing; understand the need to build social capital and positive belonging; investment in the whole person; optimise the wider social value of community and voluntary sector; ensure the voice of those with lived experience is heard at all levels.

We need to recognise the limitations of our knowledge and personal experience, our unconscious and conscious bias, in order to respond effectively and co-create a universal space which works for everyone and keeps people in the mainstream. We need to develop policy which makes a difference and strategy which achieves the difference the policy requires.

The new government will be judged on whether it tackles homelessness. With the promised removal of Section 21 'no-fault' evictions, the government can make early strides. However, far more work will be needed. Mike Amesbury, shadow minister for building safety and homelessness, recently wrote that trauma-informed care and prevention is key to preventing homelessness. This holistic approach – alongside a rigorous plan to build 1.5 million homes alongside adequate infrastructure – is what is needed to end the crisis of exclusion.

Fundamentally we need a national housing strategy not just a homelessness strategy; one which addresses affordable, safe, decent, and sustainable housing which allows individuals and families to live and work and contribute to their communities. We need to reclaim the meaning of 'social security'.

We need to plan for what we want to achieve not just what we want to avoid. When we create enabling, INclusive environments and integrated, purposeful systems, people can thrive. As a wise woman once said, 'if we get it right for the most vulnerable, we have more chance of getting it right for everyone.'

After all, 'Leadership is what leadership does.'

This essay is part of a collection of thought pieces curated by Amnesty International UK and Labour Campaign for Human Rights. June 2024

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