

Government tackling ethnic minority homelessness

Ethnic minority households are disproportionately represented amongst those accepted as homeless by local housing authorities. They are about three times more likely to become statutorily homeless than the majority White population.

The results of recent research by the ODPM imply that BME communities generally live in a cycle of deprivation, encompassing low educational achievements, poverty, unemployment, ill-health, stress and social isolation, which lead to them having fewer housing options and thus being disproportionately vulnerable to homelessness.

The research also showed that experiences of statutory homelessness services by BME clients were generally poor, with complaints about customer service, including:

- negative attitudes amongst frontline staff
- lack of consistency in advice
- poor information about the progress of applications
- inappropriate and poorly maintained temporary accommodation
- being moved between temporary accommodation without explanation.

In some local authorities, provisions were excellent, with clients empowered to seek training or employment, to learn English and to lead full and normal lives. In others, service users were left in unsuitable accommodation without support,

sometimes in spite of serious unmet needs.

According to ODPM findings, Local Authorities generally lacked a strategic approach to meeting the needs of ethnic minority homeless households, failing to understand the causes of ethnic minority homelessness and ways of preventing it. This stopped some ethnic minority people in need from approaching authorities for help.

ODPM urge Local Authorities to consult any authorities, organisations and persons that could assist in drawing up homelessness strategies, particularly all local ethnic minority communities, age and gender groups. These consultations should identify the most pressing gaps in homelessness provision.

Making any homelessness services, statutory or otherwise, accessible requires:

- increasing awareness of current homelessness services in ethnic minority communities;
- ensuring services are culturally sensitive, appropriate to needs and accessible;
- developing specialist services for the ethnic minority population.

The ODPM advise promoting knowledge of services provided by:

- producing leaflets, posters, audiotapes and videos and distributing them in places likely to be attended by ethnic minority people, such as schools, public libraries, GP clinics, community groups and religious centres
- outreach work with communities through seminars, exhibitions, open days and so forth.
- Promote issues important to you through ethnic-specific media.

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There are a number of other ways to help ethnic minority people at risk of homelessness, and the ODPM's Tackling Homelessness Amongst Minority Households: A Development Guide gives further advice on this issue, and can be downloaded as a pdf from the ODPM website, or requested in hard copy by phoning 0870 1226 236 or emailing odpm@twoten.press.net.

Using technology to fight isolation for the homeless

St Mungo's in London, and Tech4all, a London-based charity that uses technology to alleviate poverty, have launched a new service called VoiceMail4All that will give homeless people their own voicemail telephone number. Having a private telephone number at which people can leave messages 24 hours a day will allow homeless people to find jobs, stay in touch with family and friends, be contactable by resettlement workers or look for accommodation.

A pilot has already been run in London, and proved successful, and it is hoped that now the VoiceMail4All scheme has been introduced across the capital, other homeless agencies will soon be offering the scheme to clients across the country.

The scheme has proved useful for job-seekers, placing the homeless on an equal footing with other applicants by making their homelessness less of an issue and allowing them to hear from potential employers personally rather than leaving details of their keyworker or hostel reception.

The scheme has also helped clients organise accommodation and get back in touch with their families.



VHG Conference

'Money's too tight to mention': don't forget to book your place at the VHG Conference, taking place at the Peterborough Marriott Hotel on 25th and 26th October. The Conference covers regional progress and future directions on the prevention of homelessness, and current and future challenges for providers of voluntary sector services. For a conference brochure with details of workshops, debates and costs, please contact Fola on 01603 617 299 or fol@vhg-east.org



Gypsies and Travellers

The Government has allocated £56 million for provisions for gypsies and travellers over 2006/08. This is to be known as the Gypsies and Travellers Sites Grant, and is part of the government's commitment to provide at least 450 additional pitches for gypsies and travellers by 2008.

The Eastern region has about one third of the total number of unauthorised encampments in England, and therefore the region will probably spend about £18m between 2006 and 2008 to deliver 100 additional pitches.

Ethnic Minorities Innovation Fund

The ODPM have launched a £3 million Ethnic Minorities Innovation Fund (EMIF) which will provide grants in 2006/06 and 2007/08 to successful bids which identify new and effective approaches to tackling and preventing homelessness-related issues amongst ethnic minority groups in England.

For information about either funding stream - www.odpm.gov.uk

Shelter claims Assured Short-hold Tenancies undermine sustainable communities

Shelter released their report, 'Safe and Secure' which demonstrates that the end of assured short-hold tenancies (ASTs) is now the third most common cause of homelessness, and that households that rent privately now move twice as frequently as they did in the 1980s.

Government aims to create sustainable communities are being undermined by ASTs claim Shelter; with a quarter of households renting privately admitting that they do not know anyone else in their neighbourhoods. The report reveals that tenants living in ASTs are less likely to take up local services such as doctors and dentists, and less likely to register to vote.

"The private rented sector is increasingly becoming home to creeping insecurity..."

Shelter's report also exposes the fact that privately rented homes are in poor condition because tenants are reluctant to ask landlords to carry out repairs, with only a quarter of those 'dissatisfied with repairs

and maintenance' enforcing their rights. 21 per cent of those said this was because they 'did not want to cause trouble' with their landlord.

Shelter Director, Adam Sampson, said: "The private rented sector is increasingly becoming home to creeping insecurity. Some of the poorest and most vulnerable members of society live in private rented

homes. We welcome the steps taken by ministers through the recent Housing Act to improve the worst private rented sector homes - however it is vital that the Government

considers measures to increase security of tenure and ensure the private rented sector is a suitable housing option for homeless households and others who need a stable and decent home."



Crisis call for census on hidden homelessness

The latest Government Statutory Homeless Figures show that there are still 100,000 in England living in insecure temporary accommodation.

Shaks Ghosh, Chief Executive of Crisis says: "We are disappointed to see that there are still so many people in London living in insecure temporary accommodation. It is a disgrace that there are so many people still living in hostels, bed and breakfasts and other such places.

"We are pleased to see that rough sleeping has gone down but these people, now moved on to temporary accommodation, are still homeless – they are as far from accessing a permanent secure home as ever.

"As the national charity for single homeless people, we need the Government to conduct a hidden homelessness census to establish the real size and nature of the problem."

Crisis estimates that there are approximately 380,000 hidden homeless people across Britain living in hostels, bed and breakfasts, squats or sleeping on the floors of friends and family. Most are not included in any government homelessness statistics.

Booze crackdown advised

Thames Reach Bondway, a London-based homelessness charity, has launched a campaign calling on breweries and the Government to limit the alcohol content of super-strength lager.

This brings attention to the fact that a single 500ml can of 9% super strength lager contains approximately twice the Government's daily recommended safe intake of alcohol for women. They have highlighted the serious health risks and social devastation such drinks can cause among marginalised and homeless people.

Thames Reach Bondway's recommendations to breweries and the Government include:

The creation of a 6% ceiling on the level of alcohol permitted in canned and bottled super strength lagers and ciders

The introduction of health-warnings similar to those on cigarette packets, clearly stating that the consumption of a single can will lead to the drinker exceeding daily recommended safe alcohol limits

According to data from the Office of National Statistics, the number of alcohol related deaths has increased by nearly a fifth in the last four years, whilst The Government's Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy for England revealed last March that there are up to 22,000 premature deaths per annum caused by alcohol. This is particularly an issue for the homeless and those who work with them, because it is believed that just under half of homeless people have alcohol dependencies.



Image courtesy: Thames Reach Bondway/Imagination GIC

Rough sleeping in England falls to record low

Housing Minister Yvette Cooper announced on 12 September that the number of people sleeping rough on the streets in England has fallen to a record low.

According to the Annual Rough Sleeping figures for 2005, submitted to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister by local authorities, there has been a 75 per cent reduction in the number of people sleeping rough in England since 1998, from 1,850 to 459.

National Statistics published at the

same time show the number of people becoming homeless has also fallen, now 17 per cent lower than in the same period the previous year.

Responding to these improvements in housing and homelessness, Yvette Cooper also announced the launch of the £2 million Working Future scheme,

which aims to help more families out of temporary accommodation.

The Working Future pilot in London will enable local authorities to subsidise the rent of families in temporary accommodation, which will give them a more realistic opportunity to end their reliance on housing benefit, gain employment and find a permanent home.

Cotman tenants help raise cash for the homeless

Tenants of one of Norfolk's leading Housing Associations, Cotman Housing, have helped raise nearly £640 for the homeless. Cotman Housing recently asked all its 1,083 tenants to complete a housing satisfaction survey to help the association find out if tenants are happy with the service they receive. And to encourage people to fill in the survey and help make the results as accurate as possible Cotman pledged to donate £1 for every completed survey returned by the closing date.

The result was a total of £638 which has been donated to The Contact Assessment and Prevention Service (CAPS) run by Norwich based St Martin's Housing Trust which works with homeless people and rough sleepers and provides support and secure accommodation for them.

Vivien Farrow, Chief Executive of Cotman Housing Association, said: "We were extremely pleased with the response we had to our satisfaction survey with 59 per cent of our tenants filling in the survey and sending it back by the closing date. They have helped raise a significant amount of cash for a very worthwhile cause and we are proud to be able to hand over the money to St Martin's knowing it will directly help the homeless people of Norwich."

She added: "We were also very

pleased to find that most of the people who took part in the survey are very happy with their homes and the service provided by Cotman Housing and we hope to continue our work to provide good quality affordable homes for the people of Norfolk and Suffolk."

John Hales, of St Martin's Housing Trust, was delighted to receive the gift of cash on behalf of the charity. He said: "This is a very generous donation from Cotman which will help us in our work to provide shelter and food for those living rough in Norwich. Charities like ours exist on kind donations and it is vital we receive enough money to continue helping those in need. We are very grateful to Cotman Housing Association and their tenants for helping raise such a generous amount."

Wayne Tatlow (Left) Housing Services Director of Cotman Housing presenting the donation to John Hales Head of Operations at St Martin's Housing Trust.



News in Brief

Diversity and Housing Associations

Housing Associations will be expected to submit an annual report of their achievements in tackling equality and diversity to the Housing Corporation. The Race Equality Scheme 2005 requires associations set targets for black and minority lettings and staff numbers, BME tenant satisfaction, and BME representation on the board. This information will then be analysed and published by the Housing Corporation annually. More information can be found at www.housingcorp.gov.uk

New Permanent Secretary at the ODPM

A new Permanent Secretary for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has been approved. The Prime Minister, with the agreement of the Deputy Prime Minister has approved the appointment of Peter Housden, currently Director General, Schools at the Department for Education and Skills. The Permanent Secretary supports the Deputy Prime Minister and his Ministerial team, leads the Department and acts as Accounting Officer for ODPM.

UK Housing Awards Shortlist

Congratulations to those organisations which have made the shortlist for the 2005 UK Housing Awards; including Bedfordshire Pilgrims Housing Association, Flagship Group, South Norfolk Council and Peterborough Council. Results will be announced at a celebratory lunch in London on 2 November.

Progress in Cambridge

Cambridge is witnessing a number of developments in homelessness provisions at the current time, with English Churches opening their Cambridge Youth Foyer, the Dawe Trust launching the Jubilee Project, and Cambridge Cyrenians working towards a new project for heavy drinkers which is intended to open in mid-2006.

The VHG staff team update

We are pleased to welcome two new members of staff at VHG, Fola Ogunnowo and Elizabeth Elders. These posts have been made possible through national ChangeUp funding via Homeless Link.

Care leavers forced into homelessness

A report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has revealed how care leavers have been forced into homelessness after declining unsuitable and unsafe housing.

The report investigates life after care for different ethnic minority young people and includes information about education, employment, crime, identity, after care support and homelessness. As most people working with the homeless are aware, young people leaving care are at higher than average risk of homelessness, and often experience periods of instability and frequent moves.

Of the young care leavers interviewed, 8% were found to live in a bedsit or hostel. Interviews suggested that some of them had experienced homelessness as a consequence of inappropriate housing, with many of the young people interviewed feeling that they had had very few options in choosing where to live after leaving care.

Young care leavers seemed to be offered housing that was totally unsuitable, including unfurnished houses, the furnishing of which put young people into debt, and buildings with poor heating and damp-proofing. However, these individuals were informed that, if they declined to accept, they would be placed at the bottom of the allocations list and would face potential homelessness.

One 19 year-old care leaver said : "I'm coming out of care and [they're] saying to me if I turn that place down [they're] not going to give me nothing else... I had to kit the whole place out, it cost me hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of pounds because it was in a bad state ... had an infestation of cockroaches ... It was terrible, terrible."

Along with inappropriate housing, key factors influencing young people's experiences included early discharge from care at 16 or 17, inadequate preparation for leaving care and unplanned departure from care... Download the report, entitled Life After Care: The Experiences of Young People From Different Ethnic Groups, at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation website, <http://www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/eBooks/1859351921.pdf>

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Getting action from the Commons: Advice from third sector

If you've ever wanted practical advice on successfully lobbying MPs, Third Sector recommends guidance recently issued by NfpSynergy, including these helpful tips:

- Be precise about what you intend your campaign to achieve
- Get the timing right, and keep an eye on parliamentary schedules
- Focus on specific MPs and constituencies
- Encourage local supporters to lobby
- Create a memorable and powerful campaign brand and refresh continually
- Direct contact with MPs is vital
- Keep MPs up to date, with targeted, concise letters and regular news
- Ensure commitment from MPs, both long- and short-term
- Use the media and public area more widely
- Where necessary, join forces with others

For the full article, How to get action from the Commons by Nathalie Thomas, see Third Sector 12 October 2005, p16. Advice reproduced with permission.

Mental health at work!

Mind Out, the Department of Health's national campaign to challenge the stigma and prejudice surrounding mental health, has produced a resource for managers offering practical advice on how to manage and support employees experiencing stress, distress and mental health problems.

Homeless or vulnerably housed people are more likely to suffer from mental health problems than the general population, and managers need to know what to look out for in both service users and colleagues, and be aware of what they can do to help.

Advice to Line Managers

Firstly, some of the key signs to look out for, in order to spot when an individual has a problem and may need support are:

Changes in the individual's usual behaviour, Rapid changes of mood, Poor performance, Over performance - driving themselves to excess, Tiredness, Irritability, Tearfulness, Headaches, Increased sickness absence, Increased use of alcohol, drugs or smoking, Loss of sense of humour.

Regular appraisals or informal chats about progress allow neutral and non-stigmatising opportunities to find out any problems your employee may be having. Make clear that anything they raise will be confidential, and that if they feel unable to talk at the present time, you are always available to talk again another time.

You must ensure that any bullying is dealt with promptly and effectively. Under the Disability Discrimination Act, it is your responsibility to ensure staff are not harassed or discriminated against on the basis of a disability.

Advice to Employees

Under the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act, employers may not discriminate against current or prospective employees on the basis of their disability. 'Disability' is defined as being a physical or mental impairment that has a long-term adverse effect on an individual's ability to accomplish typical day-to-day activities.

If you fulfil the selection criteria, your disability should not be a barrier. If you are unsuccessful, you have a right to a fair and truthful justification from the employer as to why.

The employer must consider whether there is any form of support or adjustment that they can perform that will enable you to do the job.

Contact Mind Out at www.mindout.net to find out more about them, and to get a copy of their Line Managers Resource: A practical guide to managing and supporting mental health in the workplace.

Training 2005

VHG is currently devising a full regional training programme for 2006 which will include courses held in Norwich, Ipswich, Cambridge, Bedford and Luton. To register interest in receiving this brochure please contact Events Co-ordinator, Fola Ogunnowo, by telephone on 01603 617299 or email folo@vhg-east.org

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Promoting Social Inclusion in the East of England | raising the roof

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Introducing Elizabeth Elders

VHG's new Regional Network Co-ordinator

I'm extremely excited to be able to introduce myself to our members as VHG's Regional Network Co-ordinator. I took up my post in August, and have definitely been kept occupied since then! I'd like to thank those members who I have already met and visited for welcoming me, and I look forward to meeting more of our members soon, particularly at the VHG Conference.

Since I took up my position, I have been working to improve networking and support in the Eastern Region, and to disseminate good practice. To that end, I have created information about our Member Mentoring Scheme, which I hope will be of interest and use to all of our members. I have also

been working to respond to needs highlighted by some of our members, for example a desire for Managing Inclusion Briefings advising members on Eating Disorders and Dual

Diagnosis. I hope any members who feel there is a need for advice and support on particular subjects will get in touch with me so that I can work to address those needs.

I have been meeting with members and attending Provider's Forums and Housing Strategy meetings across the region, and I hope you will consider inviting me to any meeting you think would be helpful for me in my work to address the needs of those working with the homeless and vulnerably housed in the Eastern Region.

I would like to tell you a little bit about myself and the basis of my interest in homelessness issues, because I understand that many of our members might be concerned about having to work with someone closely without understanding their motivations. One of my first experiences with homelessness, and one of the influences on my interest in the work VHG and our members do, were events which affected a friend of mine. She lived at home

with her parents, until one day when we were about seventeen she brought her partner to meet her family, and her parents found out that she was a lesbian. Her parents' inability to accept her lifestyle led to her being forced out of her family home.

At this point, my friend was fortunate.

“Our work is extremely important in addressing failures in society itself, in the lack of assistance available for those who, for whatever reason, find themselves in housing and financial vulnerability...”

Rather than being pushed into sleeping rough or living in Bed and Breakfasts, a mutual friend of ours allowed her to move into his spare room. She was able to work as a waitress without having to pay him rent, and therefore saved enough money to attend university, where she is now reading Psychology. However, I soon realised that not everyone is as fortunate as my friend, and that people who are homeless are often in that situation because, like my friend, they have been let down by those who are supposed to care for and protect them. I hope that with VHG and our members, I will be able to help those who were let down, like my friend was, and are in need of our support. Our work is extremely important in addressing failures in society itself, in the lack of assistance available for those who, for whatever reason, find themselves in housing and financial vulnerability, and it is work that I am personally passionate about and close to.

VHG

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