

SHP Practice Briefing

Food for thought: soup-runs and soup- kitchens

July 2005

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Street Homelessness

By “street homelessness” Shelter means:

People who routinely find themselves “on the streets” during the day with nowhere to go at night. Some will end up sleeping out or in a derelict or other building not designed for habitation, perhaps for long periods, while others will sleep at a friend's for a very short time, or stay in a hostel, nightshelter or squat, or spend nights in prison or hospital.

Shelter's Street Homeless Project

Street Homeless Project is part of Shelter's Good Practice Unit. Our aim is to highlight the continuing problem of street homelessness in England, and promote solutions to it.

Summary and Recommendations

This briefing examines the arguments of opponents of mobile food distribution services aimed principally at homeless people, most commonly known as “soup-runs”, and the arguments of those who support them. It concludes that in some circumstances and provided certain conditions are met, such services can have a beneficial impact.

Soup-runs operate in most cities and between them see hundreds of people each week. They have however, come under fierce criticism from some mainstream agencies, who are therefore either indifferent or in some cases even hostile to the existence of soup-runs. This in turn leaves soup-runs isolated which means that in some cases they are not able to best help the people who they feed.

The first criticism levelled at soup-runs is that they encourage people to remain on the streets rather than move into accommodation. This argument is clearly only valid where there is suitable alternative accommodation available to rough sleepers, which is by no means always the case. Further, although evidence is limited, that which exists does not find a clear link between soup-runs and people remaining as rough sleepers.

Secondly, soup-runs have come under criticism for providing a poorly targeted service attracting many people who are not homeless. Soup-run agencies do acknowledge that many who they feed aren't rough sleepers. They assert though, that they provide vital nutrition for street homeless people and others, such as people living in temporary accommodation, who are subject to food poverty. Indeed, rather than being counter productive there is some evidence to suggest soup-runs could actually play a role in reducing survivalist crime.

Additionally mobile food services do undoubtedly provide a valuable contact for people experiencing social isolation and those who have difficulty engaging with mainstream services. If the soup-run is well organised and connected to other services, this non-judgemental contact can provide a platform from which some street homeless people can exit homelessness.

Therefore, based on the research conducted to date, the criticisms of soup-runs are largely unsubstantiated. However, in some areas there is over provision. Additionally, not all soup-runs make best use of their contact with people as an opportunity to initiate more substantial benefits, including where possible, ending their homelessness.

To ensure mobile food distribution services are effective in helping to reduce homelessness therefore, it is recommended that:

- Soup-runs should assess need and provision before setting up and should review this periodically. They should consider changing to provide a different type of service if it is appropriate to do so.
- Soup-runs should coordinate with each other where there is more than one service in an area.
- Soup-runs should operate to a set of minimum standards covering issues such as health and safety, food hygiene, methods of engagement, provision of information.
- Although the principle of non judgemental “acceptance” is important to the functioning of soup-runs, they should where it is possible and appropriate, be in a position to help people to exit homelessness.

- Soup-runs should be prepared to engage with other agencies concerned with homelessness.
- Mainstream agencies such as local authorities and street outreach teams should accept that soup-runs can have a useful role to play and engage with them. This happens in some areas where mobile food services operate but by no means all. In particular local authorities should consider working with soup-runs and coordinating them with other homelessness agencies, as part of their strategic homelessness function.

Introduction – a polarised debate

Since the 19th century soup-runs have traditionally existed on the fringes of mainstream provision for homeless people, and have attracted criticism. But ever since the publication of the (then) Rough Sleepers Unit's *Coming in from the Cold* in 1999, their very existence has been controversial.¹

Today, there are many soup-runs engaging with hundreds of homeless and vulnerably housed people. However, in some areas, notably some London boroughs, Bristol, and in Manchester, soup-runs have come under fire from local authorities, police and central government. Some prominent charities have also questioned the efforts of volunteers in providing this form of service.

The ensuing debate has become polarised. Opposing stances have been adopted on the value and impact of soup-runs. Some argue that soup-runs sustain people in living on the streets. It is said that distributing free food, hot drinks, blankets, and clothing creates a dependency on handouts which does little to help rough sleepers off the streets. Such naïve and, irresponsible philanthropy does not fit with today's strategic responses to street homelessness, it is claimed, and can even encourage people to sleep rough.

The providers of soup-runs have responded vigorously to criticism. They argue that their efforts are feeding, and often clothing and comforting, the most vulnerable of all homeless people. They feel their services meet immediate needs that are not met by mainstream indoor agencies, and that they work with people who are excluded from other forms of provision. They have resisted calls to curb their activities, denying that they are in any way encouraging people to sleep rough.

To date, the debate has been emotive and polarised, with a tendency to focus on events in key London boroughs. This concerns Shelter's Street Homeless Project, as a more balanced policy response to a complex issue could better inform practice on the streets.

This briefing examines the research evidence on soup-run provision, and looks at the key elements of each side of the argument. It finds that many soup-runs could improve their work (and divert their efforts to support alternative services in areas of over-provision), but that local authorities and other agencies need to be creative in facilitating this process. It concludes with recommendations for good practice; these encourage soup-runs to operate in a way which will provide a valuable, often unique, source of engagement to bring significant benefits, including an end to homelessness, to many street homeless people.

The policy context

The provision of outdoor welfare services has been contested historically. In the later 19th century, the number of private citizens distributing food and clothing outdoors increased in response to concerns about the number of applicants to workhouses. But from the 1870s the Charity Organisation Society argued that haphazard distribution of aid was exacerbating 'vagrancy and pauperism' rather than ameliorating homelessness.²

This early opposition to 'unsuitable' outdoor relief may be traced through to more recent government initiatives. In the 1990s the funding delivered to local areas via the Rough Sleepers Initiative and Homelessness Action Programme was associated with an expectation that homeless people should use the expanded indoor services on offer. Such policy initiatives escalated the pressure placed on organisations offering outdoor aid.

The Government's *Coming in from the Cold* strategy, launched in 1999, sought to 'pursue approaches which help people off the streets, and reject those which sustain a street lifestyle'.³ The explicit link between soup-runs and 'street culture' was made in *Helping Rough Sleepers off the Streets*, a report commissioned by the ODPM in 2002, which raised concerns 'that the work of voluntary groups could be counter-productive and reinforce street lifestyles'.⁴ The report's authors argued that soup-runs:

'can often send out a message that street living is acceptable and should be supported... such services can act as a magnet for other people who are not currently sleeping rough...this can contribute to a street culture and even potentially draw new people into it'.⁵

In London, central government enlisted charities in the campaign to reduce soup-runs. The Salvation Army was commissioned to run the London Soup and Clothing Run Co-ordination Project (SCRCP) between 2000 and 2002, with a target of reducing the number of soup-runs in central London by two-thirds. In December 2003 Westminster Borough Council joined forces with Thames Reach Bondway to call for further reductions⁶, and the debate arose again in winter 2004.⁷

Case study – Thames Reach Bondway

The Thames Reach Bondway Street Rescue Service began in November 2001 in response to changing patterns of need on the streets. It provides an outreach service to the most vulnerable and isolated, including elderly, rough sleepers who tend not to approach soup-runs. A paid worker and a volunteer go out in a van seven evenings a week, to make contact with people referred by the Contact and Assessment Teams (CATs), other agencies and, in some cases, members of the public. They work to build trust with individuals, assessing their needs and providing practical help including blankets, food and clothing. Where possible, the service assists clients in accessing emergency accommodation and other services.⁸

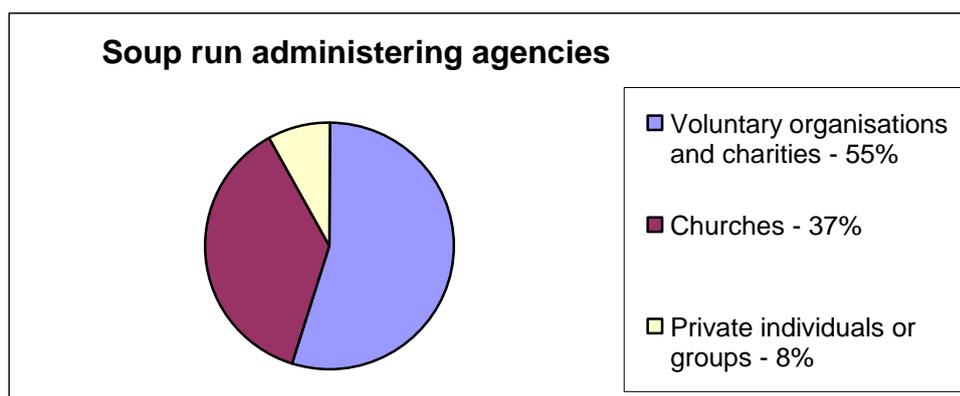
Since the rise of anti-social behaviour (including begging, street drinking and street crime) up the political agenda further sustained attention has been focussed on the unregulated providers of outdoor services. In October 2004, Manchester city council officers and the Manchester City Centre Management Company called for soup-runs to be moved indoors. They were reported as describing soup-runs as 'crime hotspots', citing 'large numbers of resident complaints about perceived or real threats'.⁹

In such a climate, some local authorities may be tempted to take formal enforcement action to prevent soup-runs from operating.

Soup-runs – the picture outside London

The most extensive evidence about an under-researched sector comes from the Homeless Places Project survey of soup-runs (and soup kitchens) outside London, undertaken in 2001.¹⁰

- The researchers received completed questionnaires from 68 projects but emphasised that this figure was a ‘considerable under-estimate’ of the actual number in operation.
- 92% operated all year round, varying between 1 and 7 days a week.
- 55% were run by charities and voluntary organisations, 37% by a church, and 8% by private individuals or groups.



- 94% used volunteers - 74% were entirely reliant on volunteer staff, but 26% had one or more paid co-ordinators.

How many people are fed by an average soup-run?

- A Homeless Places Project snapshot survey found 1,840 people were fed by 58 soup-runs outside London on one evening in August 2001.¹¹
- Individual soup-runs served between 5 and 100 people; 32 people were served on average.

How much does it cost to operate soup-runs?

64% of the projects questioned by the Homeless Places Project operated on annual budgets of less than £4,000, some of these on as little as a few hundred pounds per year.¹²

Most soup-runs surveyed provided hot drinks, soup, and sandwiches, while many offered clothing and blankets. 44% handed out packs or pamphlets with advice and details about homelessness and other services. Virtually all providers operated late at night, with a few undertaking an early morning breakfast service.

Case study – Barnabus Trust

The Barnabus Trust’s website describes it as a Christian organisation ‘working with the street people of city centre Manchester’.¹³

The website describes how the service has evolved 'from humble beginnings in 1992 with two people going out with sandwiches and a flask of tea'. It now comprises 'a large team of volunteers working from a van providing food and hot drinks, and a double-decker bus converted into a mobile medical centre run by volunteer nurses and doctors'.

The objectives of the Trust include promoting 'the good health of homeless persons', the provision of food and clothing, and 'to advance the Christian faith'.

Case study - Bristol Soup Run Trust¹⁴

The Bristol Soup Run Trust provides soup, bread and blankets, 365 nights a year to people in Bristol "who have nowhere to go and no-one to care about them". The Trust "offers friendship and help, with further facilities as and when required", and its leaflet states that up to 60 people are seen per night.

Teams from different churches take responsibility for different nights. All volunteers are issued with Code of Practice guidelines, which state that the soup-run 'must not be used as a platform for...political or religious beliefs'.

Volunteers serve initially at two set points in a churchyard and a car park, before walking out to serve people they pass on the streets.

Soup-runs – the situation in London

London, unsurprisingly, is where most soup-runs take place, and where they have attracted most controversy. Yet this unregulated sector has resisted quantification, despite several attempts in the 1990s. In 2000 the Salvation Army London Soup and Clothing Run Co-ordination Project (SCRCP) monitored soup-run sites over several months and identified 110 groups converging weekly, monthly, or erratically on five main sites.

SCRCP commented:

‘This level of service provision had been appropriate in 1992, when between 2,000 and 3,000 people were estimated to be sleeping rough in London. But it was incongruous in 2000 – a soup-run user could get up to seven meals a night at Lincolns Inn Fields’.¹⁵

By 2002, when the SCRCP funding ended, the project felt it had met its target of reducing the number of soup-runs by 70%, by adopting a strategy of ‘influencing through relationship’. Soup-runs were persuaded to rationalise their services and volunteer efforts were diverted into other projects.¹⁶

But in January 2005 the Salvation Army estimated that about 60 soup-runs were visiting the five main sites, suggesting that numbers have crept up again.¹⁷ In 2003 and 2004 Westminster Council, with the support of charities like the Salvation Army and Thames Reach Bondway, were so concerned about the situation that they were publicly urging soup-runs not to visit London.

According to the press, some agencies in Westminster are apparently suggesting that reductions in the numbers sleeping rough mean that soup-runs should be scaled back to single figures.¹⁸ Simon Milton, Westminster Council Leader, said in 2004:

‘The ratio is disproportionate; you don’t need so many soup-runs for that number of rough sleepers’.¹⁹

Regardless of the ongoing debate over the extent of the reduction in numbers sleeping rough in London, there is no doubt that soup-runs are providing for significant numbers of people. The London Simon Community, which has been operating a soup-run since 1963, says they routinely provide tea and sandwiches to between 100 and 130 people, mainly rough sleepers.²⁰

Exploring assertions and assumptions

In this section, Street Homeless Project assesses some of the assumptions and assertions prevalent in the current debate on soup-runs.

1. 'Most people using soup-runs are not rough sleepers'

Soup-runs are generally indiscriminate in whom they target, and outside London, only 8% of soup-runs are aimed specifically at rough sleepers.²¹ While service providers responding to the Homeless Places Project survey²² estimated that 36% of soup-run users outside London were sleeping rough, the Salvation Army's survey of London soup-runs (2000 to 2002) suggested that most people using them were ex-homeless people who had been re-housed.²³

The Homeless Places Project research found that soup-run users outside London typically comprised approximately:

36% rough sleepers

40% nightshelter, B+B, and hostel residents, or staying with friends or family

24% had their own accommodation.²⁴

The Salvation Army SCRCP defined three categories of London soup-run users:

- very vulnerable entrenched rough sleepers with multiple needs, who do not access mainstream provision.
- rough sleepers engaged with outreach teams, who already use other services like day centres.
- the 'unsettled resettled', ex-homeless people with accommodation who are socially rootless and attracted by the camaraderie of soup-runs.

Some soup-runs operate very late at night or early in the morning to discourage people in hostels or in other accommodation from attending. Others offer their services to all in need, recognising that food poverty is endemic among poorer sections of society including people in hostels, refugees, those with welfare benefit problems, and ex-homeless people with poor budgeting skills.

'...the first time I was in the nightshelter I hadn't eaten a decent meal in six days, so I figured I was properly qualified to go and have something to eat.
(hostel resident, male, 39 years).'²⁵

Shelter comment: Research studies underline the fact that vulnerable rough sleepers undoubtedly *do* use soup-runs, including those not accessing other services. Many other users of soup-runs could be classed as 'street homeless' (ie living in hostels, shelters or squats). The remainder are likely to be homeless and living in temporary accommodation and/or experiencing food poverty. For instance soup-run users include people staying in temporary accommodation that lacks proper cooking facilities. Even for those who are housed soup-runs still meet needs, either because of food poverty, or because once housed former homeless people can suffer isolation and loneliness. Whilst soup-runs are perhaps not an ideal way to meet these needs, opponents need to acknowledge the role soups runs play in these situations

2. 'Providing food on the streets sustains a street lifestyle'

Opponents of soup-runs assert that they encourage a damaging street lifestyle. Jeremy Swain, chief executive of homelessness charity Thames Reach Bondway, commented of one resettled client:

‘He told me that he intended to stay on the street for just a few weeks but the handouts – three a night – turned up at his feet, and he eventually stayed out for two years.’

The charity says it talks to other people at soup-runs who have walked miles into central London, often intending to stay the night on the street rather than returning home.²⁶

Proponents argue that learning to exploit the free food available from soup-runs is a key aspect of adjusting to street life.

Shelter comment: This may have some truth particularly in London where arguably there is overprovision. But only a minority of soup-run users would fall into the category of those who choose to use soup-runs because they make life “easier”, most use them because they have or see no alternative. Soup-runs may make life more tolerable on the streets, and seeking them out may become a purpose in itself for some entrenched rough sleepers, even after they have been housed. It is however unwise to rely on anecdotal evidence that soup-runs encourage people to stay on the streets, as research into entrenched rough sleeping has not identified the existence of soup-runs as a major contributory factor.

3. ‘Soup-runs do not help people off the streets’

The central ethos of most soup-runs is to provide help to meet immediate needs for food, drinks, blankets, clothing and companionship. This is usually done in an altruistic, undemanding manner, free from judgment. The vast majority of soup-runs surveyed by Homeless Places Project defined their ethos as one of ‘acceptance’, as opposed to one emphasising ‘change/rehabilitation’ or ‘empowerment/resource’.²⁷ Volunteers may lack the skills and time to do more in-depth case-work which would help rough sleepers off the streets.

A street outreach worker in one city, quoted in Homeless Places Project said: ‘...it can be quite difficult getting these [soup-runs] on board to ensure a professional approach to the work they’re doing. [H]elping clients to move away from life on the streets... very often is missing in some of these voluntary organisations’.²⁸

Yet a sizeable minority of experienced soup-runners see soup-runs as a first step in building a trusting and supportive relationship with a client, which is a prerequisite for further work including resettlement away from the streets. This seems to occur especially where the soup-run is part of, or linked to a larger charitable operation. A recent Crisis research report, *Daytime Homelessness*, confirms that service providers and users believe that food runs have an important role to play in helping hard to reach individuals to access other services and so help them begin to make a progression away from homelessness.²⁹

Shelter comment: Soup-runs undoubtedly offer some fundamental care at times and in places where it is most needed. The role of soup-runs is not to do in depth casework and only a few soup-runners are highly trained professionals. The vast majority are volunteers who have had very little (if any) formal training and therefore whilst they may be able to

give basic information about the location of hostels etc, are rarely in a position to give any in-depth advice about how to address support needs, access welfare benefits etc. Volunteers' simple, caring, non-judgemental engagement with service users 'where they are at' is however very important to some service users (particularly when they are at a crisis point in life, may feel shame, and feel that they have no-one to turn to) – even if there is no formal exchange of information/advice. However, to fulfil their potential soup-runs as a minimum need to be able to signpost people to other services and should look to where they are able to work proactively with other street based services and mainstream agencies. However, such mainstream agencies could work more proactively to link their services to soup-run activity.

Examples of bad practice in soup-runs reported by the Salvation Army in London.³⁰

- 'Many soup-runs preferred to move quickly from one site to another, overlapping with other groups, and discharging food with a brief chat to beneficiaries and little, if any, real engagement.'
- A small number of groups were accompanied by under-age volunteers, including young children.
- Some soup-runs attended sites erratically, with a 'voyeuristic' attitude.

To counter such problems soup-runs should operate to a series of minimum standards. Such standards need not be onerous given that soup-runs are often un-funded and voluntary, but they should ensure basic checks are in place covering needs for the service, health and safety, food hygiene and the accuracy of any information. Such standards are unlikely to be forthcoming from government, who would prefer soup-runs not to exist at all, so it may be that soup-runs themselves, perhaps in conjunction with larger voluntary agencies, develop some kind of basic self-regulatory framework.

4. 'There are too many soup-runs, because there is sufficient indoor provision'

It certainly seems that London and some other cities have too many soup-runs. Between 2000 and 2002, the SCRCF reduced the number of central London soup-runs from 110 identified groups,³¹ but recent figures suggest 60 groups are now operating in the area.³² In Manchester there are reportedly between 12 and 15 regular soup-runs.³³

It is harder to make the case that indoor provision is sufficient or adequate for everyone who needs it. Many rough sleepers with multiple needs have challenging behaviour which is less problematic in the outdoor setting of a soup-run than in enclosed premises; often street homeless people who use soup-runs are banned from day centres.

It would be dangerous to stop soup-runs on the grounds that indoor services are available, because sometimes the criticisms of soup-runs (creating dependency, little real engagement) can be applied to indoor food provision.

Shelter comment: While overprovision needs tackling in some areas, it is wrong to argue that all soup-runs could be replaced by existing or planned indoor services. There is a continuing need for small-scale, food-based, outdoor provision, to reach entrenched rough sleepers who will not or cannot engage with indoor services. Additionally some areas lack indoor provision or it is only open for part of the week.

5. 'Soup-runs prevent starvation by engaging people who do not engage elsewhere'

Many advocates for soup-runs certainly believe that they are plugging gaps in a failing system, and preventing people from starving. They argue that soup-runs offer an inclusive service for people who are excluded or self-exclude from mainstream provision.

One soup-run co-ordinator quoted in Homeless Places Project research said: '...the system is always gonna fail somewhere...and at the end of the day, if the need isn't supplied, people will die.'³⁴

Shelter comment: Soup-runs undoubtedly play a role in reducing food poverty and improving the nutrition of street homeless people. Furthermore, the existence of soup-runs may reduce the incidence of survivalist crime. Just like mainstream services however, soup-runs can also fail to engage with some of the people their services are targeting. Busy soup-runs can be intimidating, sometimes precisely because they are serving volatile individuals barred from other services in an unregulated environment. Soup-runs may be particularly intimidating for the newly street-homeless, women, destitute asylum seekers and refugees, and the mentally-ill.

Soup-runs need to recognise therefore that attracting large crowds to a van may exclude the most vulnerable and isolated rough sleepers, but these can be reached by a smaller-scale, mobile, food-based contact service.

6. 'Soup-runs cause crime and nuisance'

Soup-runs have been accused of being 'crime hotspots',³⁵ and have generated complaints about litter, noise, and intimidation.³⁶ NAPO, the Trade Union and Professional Association for Family Court and Probation Staff, recently reported that in 2004 Manchester City Council obtained an Anti-Social Behaviour Order to prevent mobile soup vans from operating in the city centre.³⁷ Complaints will undoubtedly continue as city-centre living becomes more common, bringing residents into conflict with soup-run providers.

Shelter comment: Little evidence has been produced to support the idea that soup-runs, as opposed to indoor food provision for homeless people, are crime hotspots or cause excessive nuisance. Moreover, in the Manchester case cited above, probation staff argued that the charge of causing a mess could equally be made against the city's many pubs and fast-food outlets.³⁸ However, soup-runs may confront the general public with uncomfortable evidence of food poverty, social exclusion, and street homelessness in general

Identifying the need for soup-runs and good practice recommendations

The answers to the following questions should help groups, agencies and authorities to decide whether soup-runs should operate in their area, and give guidance on the sort of practical issues to consider:

1. Is a soup-run needed in your area?

Every group thinking of establishing a new soup-run should consider this question, and existing soup-runs should reconsider it regularly.

As a group wishing to operate a soup-run, you should be clear about exactly who it is on the streets that needs your help; a desire to serve people in need is laudable but insufficient on its own. You should bear in mind from the outset that providing food, drinks, etc should be the starting point for a broader range of opportunities for engagement and help, and that means being clear about to whom and how you can best deliver this.³⁹

If your prospective target group is not specifically rough sleepers and individuals excluded from other services, then other mechanisms of food distribution should be considered to relieve food poverty (eg food parcels, indoor provision, food vouchers).

If your specific target group is rough sleepers and those excluded from existing provision, then you should look at what provision is already available. A formal mapping exercise is probably beyond the scope of small groups, but informal enquiries should be made of existing indoor or outdoor food providers. Concerns that certain individuals are not benefiting from existing services should in the first instance be addressed by suggesting operational changes to indoor services, perhaps reviewing opening hours and exclusion policies, or running more targeted outreach food services from premises.

If there are no existing service providers, groups may need to do some low-level outreach to ascertain levels of need. Basically you need to establish whether there are sufficient numbers of disengaged or vulnerable rough sleepers who are unable to access food or other services. There is certainly some overprovision in central London, though the situation may be different in outer London areas

Even if there are existing soup-runs there may still be a case for extra provision. You should check out what other provision exists and what nights they operate. In some areas for instance different soups runs work together to provide a coordinated service ensuring they don't duplicate operation on the same nights (see the Bristol case study above). Where indoor provision exists, a soup-run may still be needed but this needs careful assessment. It is also worth remembering that even if you decide that a soup-run is not viable there are plenty of other ways of supporting street homeless people using voluntary effort.

Shelter's Street Homeless Project can assist with basic needs assessment and provide advice on the options available when considering provision.

2. Can indoor food provision meet everyone's needs?

Ideally groups should establish, or improve existing, indoor services, where suitable premises are available.

Indoor food services aimed at street homeless people will inevitably attract 'unsettled resettled' people and generate crowds. This, together with the fact that indoor care inevitably leads to exclusions make some services less attractive to some of the most vulnerable, chronically street homeless people. A mobile outdoor food and engagement service may be necessary to engage with individuals such as these. Moreover, individuals who are the subject of anti-social behaviour orders may not be able to visit certain parts of a city so may not be able to access the main soup-run service.

3. If there is a need for an outdoor food and engagement service, what form should it take?

Shelter agrees with agencies like the Salvation Army that the traditional soup-run model of a 'hand-out' to large crowds around a van can be improved upon, especially in London.

If people sleeping out are to be targeted, the preferred type of outdoor food and engagement service, especially in large urban areas, would be on foot, possibly supported by a vehicle. Such a service should carry soup or hot drinks, and be able to distribute blankets to people at risk; the primary aims should be to minimise the harm caused by a street lifestyle and to engage hard-to-reach clients as a first step towards offering accommodation off the streets.

In areas where there is absolutely no food provision for large numbers of homeless people, van-based services may prove more practical. However, van-based provision whilst assisting people subject to food poverty and social isolation may attract large crowds which can intimidate some rough sleepers, so a mobile service will still be needed. People using services after 10pm or before 9am are more likely to be sleeping out with no other options. Van based services may wish to consider this when deciding on their operating hours.

Where van-based services exist, they should endeavour to operate with high ratios of staff/volunteers to clients. Staff/volunteers should be involved primarily in engaging clients and discussing their move-on options, albeit subtly, rather than with serving alone. Staff/volunteers need to be equipped to do this, and this will involve a combination of basic training, carrying information and access to more in depth sources of help perhaps via the soup-run coordinator. A balance needs to be struck. Soup-runners are not professional outreach or caseworkers, and their "acceptance" ethos is key to their success. They should though, be able to initiate the process of getting a person off the streets when the opportunity arises.

4. What should outdoor food and engagement services be aiming to do?

Soup-runs need to bear in mind at all times that one of their key aims is to help engage people for the longer term by meeting their immediate needs. It's about meaningful engagement rather than solely feeding and clothing people. In particular, when some food provision already exists, soup-runs should not aim to be feeding homeless people three times a day, seven days a week. They should be working creatively, using food and clothing as a way of encouraging disengaged people to link back in with other services which can facilitate their transition back into independent living.

5. How can soup-runs and other agencies work together more productively?

Ideally, soup-runs should be able to make active referrals (not just signpost service users) to other agencies including accommodation services. However, other agencies may need to engage proactively with soup-runs for this to occur.

There are several ways that this can happen. Larger service providers could operate soup-runs as part of an outreach programme, or they could commission other groups, eg church groups, to do so on their behalf. Soup-runs offer larger organisations a productive way of involving volunteers and are a good venue for informal dialogue with potential or current service users.

Agencies and local authorities should recognise that soup-run co-ordinators and volunteers may well have jobs which prevent them from attending forums or working proactively with agencies in conventional ways; the onus is thus on mainstream service staff to attend soup-runs and make and maintain the links (in the first instance this should include outreach workers who can refer into hostels, but may also include drugs workers, primary care teams, and local authority housing advisors). In Manchester, for example, two local authority homelessness officers accompany the Barnabus Trust's soup-run once a fortnight and Cardiff city council meets regularly with the city's two soup-runs through the street carers group.

Local authorities could consider appointing soup-run development or liaison officers, who could work with soup-runs to either divert their activities or increase their capacity to work more productively with individuals. A small grants programme may act as an incentive. A Salvation Army-type co-ordination and reduction scheme may be successful but needs to be continually funded for lasting effectiveness and should be conducted with sensitivity to the motivations of soup-run providers.

The continued existence of soup-runs conveys an image that central government may wish to obscure - that there are people out on the street who are hungry. Whilst this may be unpalatable to government they should look beyond this and acknowledge that soup-runs can play a key role in engaging with and supporting homeless and ex-homeless people. Even the government's own figures suggest there remains a proportion of rough sleepers whose needs are not being met by mainstream agencies.

Precisely because the help they offer is largely unconditional, soup-runs can play a key role in providing contact with this group. However, the current largely ad hoc system is not serving homeless people as well as it might do. This situation could be improved by the establishment of a central co-ordinating unit to ensure that soup-runs only operate where they are needed, meet agreed standards and are linked to a wider network of agencies. It could also disseminate good practice information and stage an annual conference for soup-run providers. It would be appropriate for government to support such a unit for in doing so the aim of reducing rough sleeping to the lowest possible level would be furthered.⁴⁰

6. What if some soup-runs are resistant to change?

A certain amount of overprovision of outdoor food services seems inevitable in London, unless a scheme aimed at reducing the number of soup-runs, through negotiation and re-education, is continuously funded.

Local authorities could consider licensing soup-runs but many low-level groups doing valuable work may lack the capacity to deal with the level of bureaucracy likely to be involved (even though this may appear minimal to those in authority). Also, it must be borne in mind that some local authorities have a negative attitude towards soup-runs which will undermine this proposal.

One might expect that some overtly evangelical or long-established soup-runs may be unreceptive to any alteration or redirection of their activities. However, where soup-runs are resistant to change, authorities should be wary of taking enforcement action. In a tolerant democratic society the expression of compassion should be welcomed, even though it may not always be manifested in such a way as to achieve its full potential.

Conclusion

Critics of soup-runs claim that they are a misguided and unhelpful service to provide to street homeless people. Firstly, they argue that many soup-run users aren't rough sleepers at all. Secondly, they assert that soup-runs encourage the continuation of a damaging street lifestyle.

Soup-runs themselves acknowledge that many who use their services aren't rough sleepers, although only a small proportion live in settled housing. People who access soup-runs who aren't sleeping rough however, principally do so for two legitimate reasons. The first is that there are inadequacies in the welfare state so that food poverty remains a real issue in contemporary Britain. Secondly, many former homeless people suffer social isolation once housed and value the opportunity to talk informally to someone who isn't from an "official agency", as indeed do many street homeless people. Soup-runs are clear that meeting these needs is a legitimate part of their operation.

Turning to street homelessness, there is no evidence to suggest that the availability of small amounts of free food is a major reason why people remain on the streets. This is more likely to be related to the use of drugs and alcohol and a lack of suitable accommodation and support options. Indeed, run well and coordinated, soup-runs can and do play an important role in enabling people to begin to exit homelessness.

This doesn't happen spontaneously however, and to ensure soup-runs do maximise their potential there is no reason why a set of agreed minimum good practice standards cannot be developed. These should cover: health and safety, food hygiene, needs assessment, methods of engagement and the provision of information. In view of the voluntary and unfunded status of many soup-runs such standards should not be onerous, but will ensure soup-runs meet a need and are successful.

The meeting of immediate needs for food, hot drinks, and/or clothing/bedding is an effective (and cost-effective) way of starting a positive supportive relationship, which can be built upon by street outreach teams, day-centres, and hostels. The reality is that each week soup-runs are engaging with street homeless and vulnerable people and will probably continue to do so despite some official attempts to discourage them. Mainstream agencies are therefore better working with, rather than against, them.

Feedback

It would be very useful if you could indicate what you thought about this briefing.

1. What are your views on the role of soup-runs?
2. Was the briefing easy to read in terms of language and structure? Please feel free to make any suggestions for improvements.
3. Would you be interested in receiving further SHP practice briefings? If so please contact SHP using contact details below.

Please send your feedback to Street Homeless Project at: streethp@shelter.org.uk or Street Homeless Project, Shelter, 3rd Floor, Wellington Buildings, The Strand, Liverpool L2 0PP

Acknowledgements

With thanks to the following soup-runs and organisations who participated in a seminar on this issue, or who otherwise provided information:

Barnabus Trust, Manchester
The Bristol Soup Run Trust
Faith Christian Group, Reading
Genesis Trust, Bath
John Handle and Steve Hyde, Cardiff City Council
Leeds Simon Community
Leicester Salvation Army
London Simon Community
Norwich Salvation Army
Nottingham Soup Run Teams
Salvation Army Eagle Project, London
Sheffield Soup Run
Shelter line (Shelter's free housing advice helpline)
St Ignatius Church, London
St Peter-in-Chains RC Church, London
Thames Reach Bondway
Trent Vineyard Church Soup Run, Nottingham
Unleash, London
We would particularly like to thank Dr Sarah Johnson of the Centre for Housing Studies, York University for her help in preparing this document.

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- ⁴ *Helping rough sleepers off the streets: a report to the Homelessness Directorate* Randall, G and Brown, S ODPM 2002.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ See, for example, <http://www1.westminster.gov.uk/citygovernment/souprun/index.cfm>
- ⁷ "Comfort Food" www.housing-today.co.uk 26 November 2004.
- ⁸ www.thamesreachbondway.com
- ⁹ "Just what are we doing wrong?" www.manchesteronline.co.uk 7 Oct 2004
- ¹⁰ "Transitory spaces of care: serving homeless people on the street" (forthcoming in *Health and Place*, quoted with authors' permission) Johnsen, S, Cloke, P, and May, J 2003.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ www.barnabus-manchester.org.uk
- ¹⁴ Information about the Bristol Soup Run Trust taken from its leaflet, Chairman's Report 2003-4, and Code of Practice, kindly supplied by its chairman Mr Graham Wheeler.
- ¹⁵ "Soup of the day" in *Connect: the magazine from Homeless Link* Moore, K 2002.
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- ¹⁷ Private correspondence with Salvation Army Eagle Project.
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- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ *Daytime Homelessness*, Jones, Anwen and Pleace, Nicholas (Crisis, April 2005), p56
- ⁴⁰ Crisis also recommends that the Government and local authorities should continue to support services which provide basic services as they can act as referral point for other appropriate agencies. Ibid, p57.