

Labour's "homelessness czar" attacks aid to people forced to sleep outdoors

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The Blair government has used the launch of a campaign aimed at reducing the number of homeless to attack voluntary organisations that feed and clothe those forced to sleep out on the streets.

The government's new "homelessness czar", Louise Casey, told the *Observer* newspaper that organisations providing food and clothing to those on the streets only "encourage" the problem. "With soup runs and other kinds of charity help, well-meaning people are spending money servicing the problem on the streets and keeping it there," she said.

A former deputy director of the homeless charity Shelter, Casey went on to claim that people were encouraged onto the streets by the "plethora of services" available there. It is possible, she continued, to get a "better sleeping bag on the Strand than you can buy in the camping shop Blacks".

Casey was appointed by the Blair government in February to show its determination to tackle homelessness in Britain. In line with this, Labour has backed the "Millennium Plus initiative" by the homeless charities Shelter and Crisis, via its "Rough Sleepers Unit". The homeless charities have called for all hostels, housing organisations and community groups to provide beds over the New Year, with the aim of getting "rough" sleepers off the streets for good.

Shortly before its launch, Casey claimed that her remarks were in line with the Millennium Plus initiative. In reality, the government has picked those aspects of the campaign that best serve its own right-wing agenda and ignored others. In the case of providing accommodation for those on the streets, the government's "Rough Sleepers Unit"—in partnership with the coffee conglomerate, Nescafé—is to pilot a scheme in 13 towns and cities in England, providing a bed and then given housing advice to those sleeping on

the streets.

The Shelter report, *A New Approach to Homelessness and Allocations*, sets out a number of wide-reaching proposals. It draws attention to the fact that many homeless people find it increasingly difficult to get permanent accommodation. The numbers of homeless accepted by housing authorities for permanent tenancies fell by more than 2,000 during 1998 to 25,420. The numbers accepted for temporary accommodation increased during the same period from 47,480 to 49,010. Temporary accommodation includes hostels and bed-and-breakfast quarters. Those living in such circumstances remain highly vulnerable. In particular, those with children are adversely affected as they face constant moves, which disrupt education and create problems accessing health care.

Homelessness charities estimate that there are currently 2,000 people sleeping on the streets of England on any given night. They have also expressed concern that the boom in the cost of real estate in London—which has seen average house prices in the capital rise by 53 percent in six years to nearly £150,000—will exacerbate the problem. Landlords are selling off property to take advantage of the price hikes, depleting the stock of rented accommodation available. Last week, representatives from the Association of London Government held an emergency meeting with Housing Minister Nick Raynsford, after homelessness in the capital rose to a record 38,000 households. London councils are now rehousing people into bed-and-breakfast accommodation in northern England.

The report also points out that some of those who were given accommodation did not receive any longer-term help, and lost their tenancies as a result. Some of the main factors involved in homelessness, the report said, are drug and alcohol abuse, relationship

breakdowns, mental health problems, unemployment and leaving prison. If these issues were not also tackled by other agencies—such as social services departments—people continued to have enormous difficulties.

What was needed, the charities insist, is a government strategy towards homelessness based on "longer-term sustainability". Amongst their recommendations are that local authorities should have a "corporate duty ... to prevent homelessness" and that they must "secure suitable accommodation and take reasonable steps thereafter to prevent the loss of that accommodation".

The Blair government's concern with rough sleepers, however, is that they tarnish the image of cities, particularly London, and undermine official efforts to "sell" localities as prime investment sites.

Far from remedying homelessness, Labour's policies have exacerbated the problem. It has created new provisions that mean local authorities do not have to house asylum seekers or "foreigners", has changed legislation so that single parents and expectant mothers no longer receive priority housing and has empowered local authorities to evict tenants for "anti-social behaviour".



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