

Contested territories: Homelessness and faith-based services

*Faith-based organisations (FBOs) are key players in service provision for homeless people. Here **Sarah Johnsen** explores how FBOs have found themselves at the heart of debates about the role of religious bodies in welfare provision generally, and debates around the most effective means of addressing street homelessness in particular.*



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Faith-based organisations (FBOs) have always been, and remain, key players in service provision for homeless people. Their contribution is welcomed by many, given the commitment and resource that faith communities bring to attempts to combat this pernicious social ill. Their involvement has not been devoid of controversy, however. FBOs have found themselves at the heart of debates about the role of religious bodies in welfare provision generally, and most effective means of addressing street homelessness in particular. Some of the critiques directed at them are arguably misplaced, but others speak to broader debates about the extent to which homeless people should be encouraged or 'made' to alter their behaviours.

Misplaced assumptions regarding the risks of proselytism and exclusion

A number of years back, the **Commission on Integration and Cohesion** acknowledged that commissioners administering public funds often feel 'squeamish' about supporting FBOs, given anxieties that they might be unable to quell a (presumed) compulsion to promote their religious beliefs or may discriminate against certain groups. This view is not without historical foundation in the homelessness sector, given that not so very long ago some homeless people were indeed expected to **attend worship or scriptural study** here in the UK, and such practices continue to be commonplace in a number of other **international contexts**.

Recent research has, however, shown that such practices have been discontinued by virtually all FBOs offering services for homeless people in England. Support as regards spirituality is available, and greatly valued by some users – but engagement with this is, with very few (charitably funded) exceptions, optional. It thus seems that commissioners need not **fear** that

FBOs will use public money to proselytise, in the homeless sector at least. Further, no evidence was found of FBOs excluding homeless people on grounds of religious identity, sexuality or other social classification. Faith-based homelessness agencies in the UK, like their secular counterparts, aim to be very inclusive.

In fact, the same study indicates that faith-based services are **not as different from their secular equivalents** as is commonly presumed. Most contemporary secular homelessness services grew out of faith-based initiatives, and their values are in fact strikingly similar. Furthermore, staff teams in both faith-based and secular agencies almost always contain a mix of people of faith and no faith, and often from a range of religious backgrounds.

Recent years have witnessed a reduction in the 'visibility' of religion in many FBOs offering homelessness services, for two primary reasons. First, many commissioners have placed restrictions on the expression of religion via programme delivery or in the iconography of the physical environment. Second, FBOs have, of their own accord, reduced their outward 'religiosity' to avoid unintentionally appearing unwelcoming to people of other or no faith.

As a consequence, many homeless people actually find **it difficult to discern tangible differences** between faith-based and secular services. Most will tell you that there are no systematic differences in the quality of service provided, or legitimacy of 'care' expressed by staff. In fact, there will often be disagreement amongst people using the service as to whether or not a particular project is 'religious', and if so, just how 'religious' it is.

Some homeless people give overtly faith-based services a wide berth because they have had negative experiences of religion in the past. Others seek them out because they want to explore spiritual matters or seek the support of fellow believers. The majority, however, are relatively indifferent – as long as they can choose whether or not to participate in, or talk about, anything 'religious' (which, as already noted, is almost always the case). Differences, therefore, between services on grounds of affiliation should not be overstated given the blurring of the boundaries between the religious and secular.

Response to the 'tough love' behaviour change agenda

A homeless person's service preferences tend to be dictated much more by the expectations different providers have of them regarding behaviour change than organisational affiliation *per se*. There is at present a **heated debate** regarding the extent to which rough sleepers should be pushed to 'come inside' or address other issues such as substance misuse. This has been fuelled, in part, by the rise of a **'tough love' agenda** in England, wherein metaphorical 'sticks' (such as ASBOs or byelaws) have increasingly been used when 'carrots' (offers of support such as hostel accommodation or addiction treatment) have been unsuccessful in prompting someone to stop sleeping rough or begging.

The debate has **intensified recently**, given the controversial installation of 'anti-homeless spikes' in a number of English cities to make specific 'hotspots' less conducive to rough sleeping, and attempts to include a ban on rough sleeping via the newly available Public Spaces Protection Order legislation. These initiatives provoked an extreme public backlash, and elicited outraged comments from a number of high profile public figures including **politicians** and **celebrities**. These echo a similar public revolt a few years ago when Westminster Council attempted, unsuccessfully, to **criminalise soup runs** – an initiative which was widely branded as callous and inhumane.

In the majority of circumstances, FBOs **object to the use of these 'forceful' measures** (often vehemently so), and favour a less interventionist approach which allows homeless people to 'be' and does not require explicit commitment to behavioural change. This approach has, however, been labelled 'irresponsible' by some commentators for **undermining publically-funded efforts** to proactively deter people from rough sleeping and thereby enabling vulnerable people to continue living in a way that is profoundly detrimental to their wellbeing. Research evidencing **the often**

extreme ill health and shortened life expectancy of persistent rough sleepers is apposite on this issue.

These are complex issues, based as they are on the different weighting individuals and agencies accord to welfare and liberty. They are also highly emotive, given the vulnerability of people affected and potential for interventions to harm, rather than help. The goal of most stakeholders – to help homeless people access appropriate accommodation and (re)integrate into mainstream society – is shared. The means by which different parties are willing to achieve that end are not.

At present, the evidence base about the outcomes of different approaches remains relatively weak. Evidence regarding what does and does not ‘work’ in particular circumstances is essential if the debate about which responses are most ethically defensible is to be arbitrated effectively. Importantly, both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ interventions should be subject to equal scrutiny, as one should not assume that services founded on ‘unconditional acceptance’ are devoid of potential to harm purely because they sound innocuous.

Given their role as key players in the homelessness sector and strong scriptural imperatives to care for the ‘Other’, FBOs are, and will continue to be, central to debates on such issues.

About the author



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