

BCAN Homeless Forum

working together to combat homelessness in Bristol

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Keynote Address

Homelessness is not about projects and programmes – it is about people

Val Jeal, MBE

I was delighted to be invited to speak at this important Forum – especially when I saw the topic: **Homelessness is not about projects and programmes – it's about people** because that is something about which I am passionate.

I have been working with homeless and marginalized people now for the past 15 years, first through The Salvation Army's Candle Project, secondly with One25, and latterly with the two houses we have set up in Bristol through Alabaré Christian Care Centres. These are Lazarus House – a 5-bed home for male ex offenders, and The Well, another 5-bed home for female sex workers committed to change. Both houses are staffed 24-hours a day, 7 days a week.

During all these years I have been increasingly impressed by the courage and tenacity of homeless and marginalized people. It has been an enormous privilege to share in the lives of some of these people and to support them as they have made life altering decisions. There has also been much sadness as well as a lot of laughter and joy. I would like to share with you some of the stories that have touched me deeply – stories of people who have impacted my life and changed me. I hope that through the sharing you may have a better understanding about the lives of these people.

When I started working with The Candle Project in 1991 I was fresh from Bristol University Library – and very green. I spent 2 years walking the streets of St. Paul's each morning, getting to know the local residents, the shop keepers, the homeless people, the heavy drinkers and the heroin addicts. The female sex workers would have nothing to do with me! During the first weeks I made one friend – Timmy, who was a homeless, alcoholic dwarf and a key person in the community. Without Timmy's friendship I would have made more mistakes than I did (and believe me I did make many mistakes). Timmy introduced me to his friends – an interesting lot – and they generally looked after me.

It was far easier in the early 90's to get people into treatment, and I drove Timmy half over this country taking him to treatment centres – he sometimes made it back to Bristol before I did! I said I had made many mistakes.

Finally, Timmy was housed in a flat, which was very quickly taken over by all his drinking friends, and wrecked. Then he was relocated to another very nice flat. Once again the friends moved in and chaos reigned. All this happened over a 4-year period, with Timmy's life spiralling out of control. Of course Timmy needed safe accommodation – it is a basic human need – but what Timmy really needed was supported housing. He needed to be safe, and he needed help to control his drinking

and to pay his bills. The support which we were giving to him through The Candle Project was insufficient.

One November morning in 1994 a homeless person called at The Candle Project to ask me to go to Timmy, who was lying on the pavement on Ashley Road. I immediately went to him and saw that he was very sick. We had a conversation during which I said I would get help to move him to The Salvation Army building 100 yards up the road where we could assess his needs. He refused, saying that he couldn't go on any longer, that he was ready to die. It was raining, and cold, and it broke my heart to leave him there whilst I returned to my office and called an ambulance. As soon as I saw the ambulance arrive, I returned to Timmy. I was too late, he had died – alone on that pavement – in the 10 minutes it took the ambulance to come.

I tell you this story because for me it highlighted the need for suitable, supported housing to be available to homeless people. It is a waste of resources putting them into flats where they are lonely and often without the necessary skills to care for themselves and pay bills.

The causes of homelessness are many, and the consequences of being homeless are far reaching. Homeless people often suffer from chronic ill health, and much more needs to be done to alleviate their suffering. For instance, dental care is a huge problem – especially for those abusing drugs. The shortage of NHS dentists in our city is acute, and the system in the Dental Hospital is not geared up to help chaotic people access the service.

I would also like to highlight the need for specialist care for homeless people with chronic and acute health needs. This is an issue which I believe we must face in the near future as we are now seeing the long-term effects of chaotic drug use in our city, and particularly that of crack cocaine. There are a worrying number of homeless and marginalized men and women who are Hepatitis B or C positive, who are suffering from septicaemia, deep vein thromboses, the loss of limbs, abscesses and mental health issues. The hostel care available to these people is not suitable, and indeed it was never intended for such ill people. We have certainly been very aware in The Well of the health needs of residents. One of our recent residents, a 23-year old woman, suffers from septic arthritis, is dependent upon crutches for her mobility, and is in constant pain. She needs specialist care which is not available at present.

The definition of being homeless is also complicated. There are large groups of men and women who are the hidden homeless. They do not necessarily sleep in car parks or rough sleep, but they are nevertheless homeless. Women often fall into this category, choosing instead to sleep on friends' floors or in crack houses where they exchange sexual favours for drugs and a chair to sleep in. During the past year however I have been aware of 3 women who were rough sleeping in cars. One was waiting for her boyfriend to come out of prison and slept in her car in Bishopston for nearly 2 months. The other two, a mother and 16 year old daughter (both selling sex on the street), moved around St. Paul's for months, avoiding Social Services and the police, before finally being helped into housing.

We need a much more flexible and imaginative approach to the problem of homelessness in our city. I look forward to hearing what Olly Alcock has to say, and I totally agree that there is an urgent need for the statutory and voluntary sections to

work together in this field. None of us has the resources to go it alone, but together we can make a difference.

I said that we need a flexible and imaginative approach – and I honestly believe this to be true. Our lives – those of us together here this evening – do not fit a set pattern – and we should not, must not, expect that of the homeless and marginalized people we seek to help. It should be possible to arrange housing and support for people before they leave prison so that they don't end up back on the streets and abusing drugs or alcohol within hours of their release. We must also be prepared to keep trying and not give up when a person falls at the first hurdle. Exiting from prostitution, and moving into accommodation having been homeless, needs to be seen as a process – not necessarily a one-off event, although for some it may be. There will be windows of opportunity, and those of us working with this client group need to be watchful and ready to facilitate change. But the resources need to be available to make this possible.

I mentioned The Well earlier, which is a house for female sex workers committed to change. The Well opened in March 2003, just two years ago, and during that time we have had residents. All the women who have come to The Well have been homeless, most are ex offenders, some have detoxed from drugs and others are on stable reducing methadone scripts. The average length of stay has been 69 days, with one woman staying just 4 days, and another 363 days. But whatever the length of stay – 4 days or 363 days – the residents experience, and some for the first time in their lives, a stable, safe, valuing environment which enables them to focus upon recovery.

Bristol City Council has supported The Well and Lazarus House generously during our two years through Supporting People. The level of support in the houses is high, and each resident has an individually tailored programme which includes relapse avoidance and psychosexual counselling for the women. It has been enormously encouraging over the two years to see residents recover, gain confidence and in a number of cases make links with families and children. At present both houses are full, with 5 residents in each. One resident in The Well, with support from her Key Worker and a Social Worker volunteer, has been able to make contact with her children in Care in Kent. This has taken 8 months hard work on her part, and yesterday she achieved her first goal – to attend a Case Conference in Kent to discuss the future.

Another young woman, who has returned to The Well for the second time, has recently started The Prince of Wales Trust, and is actually looking to the future – something she has not dared to do ever in her life.

A more mature resident has linked in to a community group and is learning to use a sewing machine – and loving it. She also now has regular contact with her three children and is working towards independent living.

Vital in the support offered at The Well and Lazarus House is the 24-hour staffing, flexibility of the programme, and personal key working. Each resident works towards the next, and very individual, step in their recovery.

But our residents have also experienced setbacks, and this happened to one courageous young woman in the summer of 1994.

Cathy was a resident in The Well for 363 days, during which she worked hard towards her recovery. She came to The Well after being kidnapped from the street in

October 2002, held in a flat over 3 days and repeatedly raped before being thrown out on the street and left for dead. Fortunately Cathy was found by two policemen who took her to the local hospital. After several weeks she was discharged to a hostel for the homeless, who then referred her on to The Well several months later.

Avon & Somerset Police took up the case and the rapist was convicted and received a life sentence. The Victim Support and the police advised Cathy to apply for criminal injuries compensation, which she did. Cathy had just moved into independent accommodation when in June 2004 she received a letter from the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority informing her that “due to her character” she would not be eligible for compensation. Cathy’s response was: “I feel as though I have been raped all over again”. The decision was due to the fact that she had more than 10 unspent convictions - albeit for petty crimes, most of which had been committed as a minor. Cathy was devastated.

A worker from One25, a local agency working with female sex workers, happened to be present when Cathy opened her letter and offered to take up the case. The worker wrote to CICA to request an appeal, which was turned down. Together with another One25 worker, the two women then wrote letters to local M.P.s and again approached CICA to request that Cathy’s case should be reconsidered.

During that time Caroline Flint, Under Secretary of State in the Home Office with a responsibility for prostitution, made a visit to The Well and to One25. Cathy had the opportunity to share her story with those present, and this included Valerie Davey M.P. The two One25 workers again wrote to CICA letting them know how shocked the M.P.s had been to hear of Cathy’s situation. The police officer who had worked on Cathy’s case also wrote a letter of support.

Finally, in December 2004 Cathy received a non-negotiable offer of £5500 compensation. She was absolutely delighted and accepted the offer. The offer was exactly half of that available in cases of sexual assault level 13 - because of her unspent convictions.

Upon receipt of her reduced award, this lady who had been kidnapped, brutally raped and labelled by CICA as unworthy of compensation, immediately donated £500 to the One25 project in appreciation of help received over a number of years.

Homeless and marginalized people are chiefly powerless and without a voice. We are the ones with power and with a voice and we have a responsibility to be strategic and to ensure that they have the best services possible. This is simply investing in our community as we shall all benefit from seeing men and women flourish and reach their full potential.

I look forward to more multi-agency working so that together we can meet the needs of homeless and marginalized men and women in Bristol. Statutory and voluntary bodies working together, carefully planning and properly resourced, to reach out with compassion, and in the love of Jesus, into our communities.

It has been an enormous privilege for me to work in the inner city with marginalized people. I can honestly say that they have given far more to me than I could ever have given to them. I often see Jesus in them.