

Sleeping rough

Most people agree we need to do better when it comes to helping people to have a bed for the night and a roof over their heads. There has been a rise in rough sleeping in recent years. The government agrees, has provided more money and announced new initiatives to get the numbers down.

The state can provide hostel spaces. It can do more to provide temporary housing for people whose lives have run into difficulties, whilst they get themselves back into work or a better routine for living on benefit whilst they seek employment. The problem it encounters is that so often rough sleeping is not just an issue of someone short of cash or temporarily out of a job, of someone who has fallen out with their family or suffered from the cancellation of a tenancy. It is often a deeper seated problem to do with drugs, drink, or mental health issues.

Where the person understands the problems they are in sufficiently to want help it is easier for the state to offer that helping hand, and a scandal if it does not. Where a person fears the state hostel because it would require them to volunteer to get off drink or drugs, or to conform to rules they do not like, the state has to decide how far to go in requiring people to leave the pavement bed.

The state has powers if the person is mentally ill and can be sectioned. It has powers if there is any suggestion of disorder or criminal offences. Each time there is a difficult judgement to be made about someone who is vulnerable and living in a way which the rest of the world worries about.

These complex cases are beyond most of us who are concerned and would like to help, which is why we expect the state to use its considerable resources and legal powers to act instead of us. Many people do find accommodation or could find accommodation within their own network of family and friends. There we can all help when need arises. When a member of my family lost their job and home together, I provided them free board and lodging in my spare bedroom at home whilst they found another job. After a few months they were able to take on the financial commitment of a new home. Many families do the same. Most people sleeping rough are someone's son, brother, nephew, father (or daughter, sister, niece, mother) whose families might be able to help. Most families or networks of friends have someone in them with a spare room.

Where the person's problems are such they cannot get along with any former family member or friend then the state needs to step in as the last resort with the powers that might be needed.

Any family that has an estranged family member sleeping out could at least help the state help them, if they can no longer help them within the family. More knowledge of the circumstances and problems of the person must be helpful to those trying to decide what measures are needed to persuade that person to go back to a life which includes a bed and bedroom.