

Homeless Plus: A Study in Social Integration

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It is no exaggeration to say that there is a revolution afoot in the field of social welfare. In recent decades there has been much radical re-thinking; principles which previously had been tacitly accepted, in some cases for a century or more, have become the subject of an increasingly severe and telling criticism. Experimental ventures are breaking new ground almost daily, and, though at present few have been running for a length of time or on a scale sufficient to yield more than marginal results, they are nonetheless proving that an urgent need exists for still further research and new endeavours.

Among the few which can claim a significant and definitive breakthrough, both in terms of success and in relation to other existing techniques and structures, is the Ladyeholme Association. This has been working in London for the past seventeen years and has achieved a 75 per cent success rate in re-integrating with society families and the remnants of families which, for one reason or another, have dropped out of general society and into a twilight region of (semi-) destitution; for example, the unmarried mother and her children, the ex-prisoner and his family, the mentally 'recovered' in search of a home, the prostitute escaping the trade but needing shelter and moral support, the socially unstable of almost every sort. It is a mistake to believe, as so many of us do, that existing social services are doing enough in this deceptively simple field; for the most part, the problem has either been ignored or aggravated by inadequate 'answers'. The situation demands that we look closer.

Ostensibly, there is hostel accommodation available for most of the people received by the Ladyeholme Association. Under the National Assistance Act 1948, local authorities are obliged to provide '(a) residential accommodation for persons who by reason of age, infirmity or any other circumstances are in need of care and attention which is not otherwise available to them; and (b) temporary accommodation for persons who are in urgent need thereof, being need arising in circumstances which could not reasonably have been foreseen or in such other circumstances as the authority may in any particular case determine' (Part III: Sec. 21 (i); cf. Sect. 21-28). But in the London area there are, on average, 7,000 people occupying local authority Part III Accommodation (as it is generally known) each and every day; for all practical purposes, hostels are full. Almost every major local authority in the country is currently faced with a crisis in temporary accommodation. Nor is

London unique in holding its remaining vacancies for cases of the most extreme need. It is not infrequent for husbands to be excluded from the accommodation and families split on the pragmatic grounds that this discourages applications and, at the same time, encourages residents to move on as quickly as possible. Often as not, however, a family *cannot* be accommodated together; there is insufficient room. Even the best local authorities have, of necessity, to refuse people who do not clearly fall within the scope of the Act; thus, even in the case of a husband's cruelty, the woman and the children may find themselves being sent back home 'in case it is just a family row'.

The hostels run by charities are similarly placed, though varying a little according to the type of problem with which they are dealing. Homes for unmarried mothers, particularly if exclusively Catholic, are invariably almost full and can, at best, only provide accommodation for six weeks before and six weeks after the confinement; thereafter accommodation becomes an acute problem for the mother who decides to keep her child. There are very few concerns which provide accommodation specifically for the unmarried mother and child.

It is to be sincerely hoped, however, that current criticisms of the hostel system will forestall, or at least radically re-shape, the building of new hostels. The hostel system has a very limited value. It is now a well proven principle of social welfare that, except in the more problematic cases (e.g. neurotics, alcoholics, confinement cases), the home environment can be of much greater remedial value than that of a hostel where, too often, an adjustment has to be made to the unfamiliar and impersonal mode of life. It is thus absurd that we should build new hostels for those who, although they have no home, or whose particular home environment is an integral part of their problem, will more rapidly achieve stability and integration by temporary accommodation in a (relatively) normal home environment. Though I am open to correction, I believe that the Ladyeholme Association is at present alone in providing this type of accommodation for so varied a mixture of people. If this is indeed so, then it is a serious indictment of our existing social services. For, although our newer hostels are homely and non-institutional (but still hostels), too many of our older hostels embody the social attitudes of a previous era, and embody them with such substantiality that even the most enlightened administrator is defeated. It is difficult for individuals to do anything more than temper the coldness of these buildings with their own personal compassion. The friendly word and smile, the sense that 'they' care, can do much to dispel the harshness of seemingly irrelevant rules, the lack of privacy, the removal of personal responsibility; but the fact remains that hostels, whether they be local authority or independent, tend to dehumanize rather than fit people for a fuller, more balanced life. Here and there it is still possible to find the previous era embodied in the attitudes of the

staff: a failure to respect individuality, the careless disregard of basic human emotions, and an emphasis on short-term expediency.

Since hostel accommodation is neither always desirable nor always available, we must consider the alternative—the open housing market. There is probably no need to reiterate here the findings in the White Paper on Housing, 1965, other than to recall a few of the striking figures. There were at that time (and still are) 3 million families (approximately 10 million people) living in slums, near-slums and in grossly overcrowded conditions. In London half a million people live in sub-standard conditions; 50,000 houses were declared unfit—and the figure would probably have been higher had there been any reasonable hope of finding alternative accommodation for their occupants in the short-term future; 1,000 children were in care solely because of the sub-standard living conditions of their parents. Rents are in general high, if not extortionate. The Milner Holland enquiry, conducted during August 1964 (Cmnd. 2605 of 1965), found that in four particularly notorious boroughs single rooms were, on average, from £4 per week and three-room flats from £7 3s. to £9 11s. per week; they are now even dearer. The better value accommodation invariably has a rule of ‘only one child’ or even ‘no children’. The larger family is thus forced to take a small, and often squalid, flat at a high rent, and unless its total income is relatively high, it finds itself financially paralysed and unable to climb out of the trap. The scarcity and cost of accommodation are such that there are between 45,000 and 80,000 ‘concealed households’ in Greater London (i.e. families and individuals who would set up home on their own were there a reasonable opportunity). An unknown percentage of these are ‘split families’, the family being divided between two or even three places of accommodation. In sum, private accommodation is not only difficult to obtain but is often totally inadequate and inexcusably expensive.

The appearance and rapid growth in recent years of housing associations (e.g. the Notting Hill Housing Trust—the brainchild of Bruce Kenrick) is a timely step in the right direction. By making full use of the available government grants and loans, cash-in-hand can be made to do the work of a sum up to eight times as great. The associations purchase large houses, convert them into self-contained flats and then make these available at a fair rent to families caught in the housing trap. In some cases, the property is sold at a minimal price and with excellent mortgage facilities. In either case it is *permanent* accommodation which is being provided and at a rent or price substantially below that in the open market. ‘Shelter’—the National Campaign for the Homeless—has most effectively co-ordinated the public appeals of the individual associations and distributes the funds it raises to, in the main, London, Glasgow, Liverpool and Birmingham.

It must be noted, however, that eulogising and not always well-

informed journalists have ascribed to 'Shelter' and housing associations a far greater role in social welfare than these organizations would themselves claim. By and large, the families aided are not so much poor in absolute terms but only in relationship to the acute housing shortage: some can afford to become owner-occupiers when sane mortgage facilities are made available to them. 'Shelter' and Catholic Housing Aid have an emphatic concern for the *respectable* 'poor'; though 'Shelter' would like to assist many special categories of people, it is under a legal obligation to use its funds exclusively for straight-forward housing problems rather than social ones (the distinction is 'Shelter's'). Such cases are fewer than might be imagined. The statement in the Milner Holland report that 'the families that lose the race for scarce accommodation are by no means all problem families' must be taken in conjunction with the findings of the Working Group on Homelessness: Manchester 1954-63—two-thirds of the 'homeless' families interviewed had problems more complex than their basic need for good housing. Naturally one cannot make a direct substitution of London for Manchester but it is not unreasonable to say that to exclude those whose problem is not *essentially* a housing one is to exclude a considerable number of families whose problems are not going to be eased while they remain in their present living conditions. We are, in other words, applauding our aid to the 'homeless' (and such aid is desperately required) while overlooking the plight of the 'homeless plus'. The 'homeless plus' have problems which adequate housing alone will rarely solve, though it is an integral part of the solution; they also require professional advice and practical assistance towards social integration, and this, all too often, places them outside the scope of the bodies housing the 'homeless' *simpliciter*.

The current situation in London can perhaps be best crystallized in an example. Only recently I met a family who, unable to find a suitable flat at an acceptable rent, had been obliged to split: the wife and the four children, the eldest now a girl of eleven, had lived with the wife's parents while the husband took bed and breakfast in a house a few streets away—a situation shared by countless other 'split families'. The eldest girl was subsequently raped by her grandfather; the mother immediately moved out with her children and sought help from the local authority welfare department who immediately responded with what facilities they had at hand: their Emergency Accommodation—a single room with bunks, no more than a night-shelter for families who had lost their home by fire, etc. At the same time, every effort was made to find more genuine accommodation and it quickly became clear that, unless an independent body could provide something, the children would have to be taken into care since there was no vacancy for the mother and children in the authority's hostel. This is not a happy solution at any time and least of all where there was an urgent need to keep the mother and the

eldest child together. Ideally the whole family needed a normal home context in which the severely shocked girl could recover some sense of security. Catholic Housing Aid was telephoned but they could only offer an interview four weeks later and with no guarantee of a home. The Ladyeholme Association was similarly approached and, by good fortune, a small flat was about to fall vacant, and the family have subsequently moved in, a little cramped but together and in a home of their own. There is not always so fortuitous a vacancy.

Even from such a rapid and partial review of the accommodation problem it is evident that there is a pressing need for a venture designed to meet the particular situation of the 'homeless plus'. The need was even more evident to Miss Edith Urch, the founder and organizer of the Ladyeholme Association, when, in 1951, she took a terraced house in Battersea and opened her doors to people in trouble. It was by taking them into her own home in this way that she came to see their particular need: professional guidance within a normal environment. Today there are seven houses, all in and around London, and administration is from an office/flat in Victoria—68 Warwick Way, S.W.1. This is the only generally available address of the Association for the addresses and telephone numbers of the houses are confidential. The experiment has been directed by four cardinal principles: a home environment, professional services, anonymity, and interaction.

Each house has been converted into a wholly flexible number of bed-sitters which can quickly be made up into two and three room flatlets, each self-contained with the exception of having to share lavatories and bathrooms. The flexibility ensures that the accommodation is used to its full. The number of rent-books reflects the adaptability of this system: between the seven houses there are normally twenty-four to thirty books, but at times there might be as many as forty. Rents are low, ranging from £2 to £4 per week; they do not, in fact, cover the cost of maintaining the work. To all appearances, both internal and external, the houses are like any other in their street. One of the prime reasons for eventually setting the administration apart was to avoid any indication that the houses and their occupants were out of the ordinary. It would also have been incongruous for an experiment which was breaking away from the hostel structure to have had a resident 'supervisor'. A reliable and convenient link with the Ladyeholme office is nonetheless desirable and this is maintained by telephone, personal contact with either Miss Urch herself or her helpers, and by frequent visits; in addition, the Ladyeholme van can reach each house quite quickly and those in the greatest need of care are placed nearest. The practical and psychological values of separation are thus blended with those of close proximity, for, while the emphasis is placed on encouraging a certain self-reliance and growth in responsibility (and

to this end there are no rules in the houses other than a firm request for decent living), there must at the same time be a simple means of providing support, moral and practical, at any time of the day or night.

In the early days of the venture people sought out Miss Urch either through the recommendation of friends or through their own personal acquaintance with her; as a nurse, then a Health Visitor and latterly a Tutor of nurses (though forced to retire because of a worsening spinal complaint), her contacts were wide and varied. People do still come in this way but the majority are now recommended by local authority welfare departments and similar bodies. Thus there is in most cases a professional social worker of some particular kind already attached to the family or individual; the relationship is not interrupted by taking accommodation in a Ladyeholme flat. The Ladyeholme Association sees its role, not as taking over from, but as assisting the social worker. It is significant that the most responsive cases are those in which the various 'rescue-units' have most closely collaborated. In addition, Ladyeholme has recently been fortunate in gaining the services of a professional social worker of its own.

Certain types of hostel have been condemned for their drawing together the superficially alike and inadvertently allowing an unfavourable interaction. In total contrast, the Ladyeholme experiment has placed only mixed case-histories together and has invariably achieved a valuable and favourable interaction. Ideally none of the residents knows the background of the others in the house; they may, of course, have some shrewd suspicions, but, unlike certain hostel environments, no one can be infallibly labelled; moreover, having something itself that it wants to forget, a family is disinclined to pry into the past of others. The unmarried mother is indistinguishable from the abandoned wife; the ex-prisoner and his family could as easily be the victims of a bad landlord, or, if the wife comes into the house before her husband's release, the reunion could as well be the reconciliation of a broken marriage. There is no certainty, not even the certainty that there is a 'past' to conceal. A house may, at any one time, house six or seven quite different case-histories and perhaps only two to four of these are of a nature best concealed. Everyone, however, is looking for a fresh beginning in life and is endeavouring to forget and overcome some distasteful experience. The anonymity of the houses, both within and without, is a welcomed and valued basis to that beginning. Experience has shown that there exists a direct correlation between the response to this anonymity and the determination to achieve a better future.

Not that everyone keeps themselves to themselves; on the contrary. The majority of the residents have a warm and open approach towards each other and there flows from this a highly valuable interaction. Both the unmarried mother and the divorced or abandoned

woman, who had had their confidence in men seriously shaken if not shattered, begin to shed their bitterness on noticing the care and attention shown by the ex-prisoner to his wife and children, for he endeavours to redeem the past by a more generous commitment to their future. Undoubtedly he is influenced, too, by the immediate sight of how difficult it is for the lone woman and child to make ends meet, even in a Welfare State. Stated so starkly, this perhaps sounds naive and too idealistic; the fact remains that there *is* this interaction. Though not realizing it themselves, the variety of families and individuals help each other in their readjustment and return to a more fully intergrated life.

Mention was made above of rents. Accommodation cannot be given free, nor would it be in the long-term interests of the residents if it could: the regular week by week payment for one's home is not only a training in responsible living but also a psychological reassurance of (potential) independence and self-sufficiency. This, among other reasons, is why the Ministry of Social Security (the National Assistance Board that was) pays its grants in the form a fixed personal allowance plus rent. The amount of the rent does not affect the personal allowance: that remains fixed. There is consequently a temptation here to boost the rents (particularly as the Ladyeholme Association runs with an annual deficit of £3,000-£4,000) but, in fact, they are kept at a minimum and comparable with the lowest rents of the better housing associations. It is essential that they be kept well within the range of those who have begun to earn and so enable a family to save. Unmarried mothers, in particular, dividing their time between their children and work, have considerable difficulty in earning more than a bare subsistence wage. It is ironic that the mother who has her child adopted or taken into a children's home should be in a potentially better situation than the mother who has kept her child. We have a curious sense of values.

The Ladyeholme houses aim to provide temporary accommodation for between six to eighteen months; there is, therefore, a continuous search for permanent accommodation. The majority of the families are on a council housing waiting-list, together with 150,000 other families; but occasionally they are fortunate. (As licensees, and not tenants, they remain on the waiting-list of their previous borough although they may have taken up residence in a Ladyeholme house in another borough; if they were tenants, they would move to the bottom of the new borough's list. The houses have a legal status comparable to that of a hostel and do not come under the Rent Act. As with any rescue-operation, some people do not respond but begin to drift back into crime and vice; having, as licensees, a less secure tenure than a tenant, they can be quickly removed. There are cases, nonetheless, in which a response has eventually come after a second, third or even fourth chance.) Permanent accommodation is sometimes secured from a Trust

(e.g. the Guinness Trust), but this is rare. The growth of housing associations may ease the problem, but, in the main, families must enter the open housing market. The Ladyeholme Association is itself a housing association and hopes, in time, to have its own permanent accommodation to offer its families; this would appear to be the most convenient solution. It is further hoped that there will be an admissions house, so forming a three-part system of accommodation and social re-integration: admissions (which could qualify for grants as Part III Accommodation), the in-between houses, and permanent housing (also grant aided) after the pattern of the Notting Hill Housing Trust.

The Ladyeholme experiment is beset by ironies, though. Its principle of anonymity for the people it helps has precluded any major publicity; after seventeen years of excellent work, it remains unknown to almost all except professional social workers. The consequent lack of funds has checked expansion and the venture appears both small and unimposing. Trusts have often refused grants because the Association seemed financially insecure. Local authorities are slowly becoming more sympathetic but there is, in some cases, a large gap between the finance committee and the field worker who has first-hand knowledge of the Association's invaluable work. The public has erroneously believed that there is no real problem of the 'homeless plus', particularly now that so much is being done for the homeless. For seventeen years there has been a most tragic lack of communication; tragic, in that, although the experiment has successfully aided some 6,000 adults and children, many more might have been saved from a very real destitution of body and mind had the services pioneered by the Ladyeholme Association been available to them.

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