

# News story: My 38 years in the world of rough sleeping by Jeremy Swain, Deputy Director for the Rough Sleeping Initiative

**From the newly appointed Deputy Director of Rough Sleeping, Jeremy Swain.**

At some point homelessness washes up against most of us. My own personal experience of how it can painfully encroach came very early on in my unintended homelessness career. Having graduated from university with an honours degree in Modern History, I answered an advertisement placed by a London organisation called the Cyrenians, seeking volunteers to manage a group home for homeless people in West London. The remuneration was £12 a week, food in the form of a meal shared with the residents and a bedroom in the house. It seemed an interesting thing to do for the required 9 months before I got a proper job.

It didn't turn out that way, the trap was sprung and like many others with whom I have shared experiences since, I was captivated by the personalities of the homeless people I was asked to support, moved and appalled by the unjustness of their life experiences and fascinated by the sheer unpredictability of the work. So, at the end of the 9 months I resolved to get a salaried job working with homeless people for, well, just a couple of years.

Whilst at the Cyrenians, a colleague managing an adjacent house informed me that a homeless woman with my surname was due to move in with her intimidating boyfriend. 'Your sister perhaps' he jested. I remember smiling feebly before taking the opportunity to scuttle off and ring my father, the youngest of 14 children from a family that had its fair share of dysfunctionality and tragedy. The homeless woman turned out to be my cousin. Her mother, my auntie Vera, had been killed a few years before in a car accident, a catastrophe that had a profoundly damaging impact on her family leading, in the case of my cousin, to a slow, inexorable drift downwards into homelessness.

I would like to be able to relate how I maturely dealt with my cousin's arrival, rejecting any sense of stigma and refusing to be embarrassed by the sudden, bewildering proximity of a family member. Instead, once I had admitted to colleagues that we were cousins I steered clear of her and hoped that this revelation wouldn't lead to my co-workers seeing me through different eyes. And later, when her boyfriend assaulted the resettlement worker and they were evicted from the house, I was mortified.

Those extra couple of years turned into rather more than I expected. After 38 years working in the homelessness sector I continue to be deeply affected by

the issue of homelessness and the damage it brings to so many lives. I have also been unable, and unwilling, to shake off my astonishment that it is possible to walk around the streets of our cities, towns and even our rural areas and witness people sleeping rough. Four years as an outreach worker in London in the 1980s, truly dire days in terms of rough sleeping, did not inoculate me against the outrageousness of people making do with blankets and cardboard in a shop doorway, park or derelict building and I know that many of you reading this will feel exactly the same.

And now, after many years as Chief Executive of homelessness charity Thames Reach I have moved into what is surely by any standards a proper job – Deputy Director, Rough Sleeping and Homelessness Delivery at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG).

This is a very special time for me and I hope for everyone who believes that rough sleeping is one of the most grotesque anachronisms of our age. For the first time for over 20 years we have a commitment from government to commit very significant resources directly towards reducing rough sleeping. Initially this is in the form of £75 million of funding over 2 years, much of which is targeted on 83 local authorities with the highest numbers of rough sleepers. Funding has been allocated for 2018-19 and in the last few weeks provisional allocations for 2019-20 have also been announced. We would now like to encourage other local authorities outside the initial 83 with significant numbers of rough sleepers, or with innovative ideas, to discuss with us their plans so that we can see what help we can offer to support their work to reduce and end rough sleeping.

To support, advise and hold to account the local authorities and their partners receiving the funding, we have appointed expert advisers to form a multi-disciplinary Rough Sleeping Initiative (RSI) team. They are steeped in experience of managing homelessness organisations, working within local authorities and commissioning services. Over the last few weeks I have had the privilege of accompanying them on monitoring visits to places such as Southampton, Manchester, Brighton and Cheshire East and observed with admiration at the meetings how they offer a rich mix of advice, guidance, encouragement and challenge. They are a fantastic resource and the reports that colleagues at MHCLG receive from them provide an accumulating body of evidence about the most effective approaches, interventions and programmes necessary to tackle rough sleeping which, in time, we intend to share across the country.

Alongside the expert advisers we have specialist advisers covering areas such as health, work and benefits and criminal justice. These too are experienced individuals with amazing levels of knowledge and contacts relating to their particular specialisms and a determination to ensure that rough sleeping, in all its complexity is addressed holistically and not only as a housing issue. I believe we now have a level of resource and expertise which in my experience is unique, working with local authorities and partners across the country to tackle rough sleeping.

Rough Sleeping Initiative funding is supporting a great range of posts, initiatives and programmes across the country including rough sleeping co-

ordinators, outreach services, assessment hubs, winter shelter beds, and housing-led tenancy support. The [Rough Sleeping Strategy](#), launched in August, quantifies the extent of rough sleeping in England, sets out the government's initial steps to achieve its manifesto commitment based on a series of interventions to achieve these targets based on the themes of prevention, intervention and recovery. It is an ambitious strategy, supported across government. Over the next few months, we will provide further information about how local authorities and their delivery partners can be part of these and other programmes.

We are now entering a crucial phase as we seek to help as many people as possible escape the distress and trauma that accompanies rough sleeping. As the temperature falls and the weather worsens, we are especially aware of the damage, both mental and physical, which is wrought on rough sleepers during winter. Last year, the threat of snow and below zero temperature triggered an urgent and impressive collective response. Local authorities, regional bodies, the homelessness sector, faith groups and supportive members of the public came together to help as many people as possible into shelters and other forms of accommodation. This year we want to do the same, but with more effective planning across an even wider range of bodies and organisations. Our aim is simple: to help as many rough sleepers to come inside as possible and, once they have come in from the cold, to find ways in which their range of needs can be fully addressed, enabling them never to have to sleep rough again.

There is much to do. Services funded under the RSI are fast coming into place and it is fantastic to visit projects, to see the early impact they are making and, most importantly, to meet the individual rough sleepers benefiting from them. I will be visiting many more services and projects in the coming months and I know both the Minister for Homelessness and Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government will also be getting out and about to see at first hand the progress being made. Some funded initiatives are taking longer than I had hoped to get under way and we must inject greater urgency into our collective efforts because, as we all know only too well, the consequences of rough sleeping can be fatal and delay can cost lives. I hope that the official street counts taking place in every local authority throughout England during October and November will, even at this early stage, give an indication of a reversal in the rise of rough sleepers.

But whilst the numbers are vitally important, it is the human stories behind the statistics that must drive our actions.

At the very first meeting of the newly formed RSI team we were fortunate to be joined by 4 former rough sleepers who candidly spoke about their experiences of sleeping rough in terrible circumstances over many years. All were housed, working and impressively reflective about their former lives and astonishingly free of self-pity. One of our guests, Dave, had to leave slightly early as it was his day off and he had a task to do which, as he explained it, led to his voice cracking with emotion. He needed to pick up his grandchildren from school, a pleasure and responsibility that in his former life as a rough sleeper with an alcohol dependency problem would have

been inconceivable. It felt that there was a pause, a collective catch in the throat and then we moved on, aware that for one man, escaping rough sleeping means, in picking up his grandchildren, that he can do something so simple, yet so valuable and meaningful.