Research into the lives of Romanian migrant workers living in encampments in London

Executive Summary

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Foreword - Commonweal

In 2016 Commonweal Housing launched the Starter for 10 research competition, to mark our 10th Anniversary – ten years of exploring diverse areas of social injustice where housing has a key role to play in any solution. The aim of the competition was to help an expert organisation working on the front lines of injustice find out more about a new or emerging issue – learning more about its scope, causes and impacts, as a first step towards envisaging possible solutions.

Thames Reach's winning proposal raised the issue of tent encampments, which in recent years have sprung up around parts of outer London. An emerging problem, under-reported and little understood, this was just the sort of issue that sparked the interest of Commonweal trustees and staff.

The injustice faced by those living in such unsanitary, unhealthy encampments is clear enough. Staying in the encampments is uncomfortable and unsafe. However, encampments also represent an injustice for those living in the local area: people unable or wary of using their own parks, canal towpaths or other public spaces that have been turned into the camps.

The main response so far has simply been to clear out individual encampments – which more often than not simply pop up again elsewhere, sometimes only 100 metres further on over the local authority boundary. This is no solution at all.

Before we can begin to think about how we can solve this problem, we need answers to some basic questions. Who are the inhabitants of these camps? Where have they come from, and what has driven them to live in tents? How can they be helped out of rough sleeping, and what solutions might work for them? The key finding of Thames Reach's research is that this is a distinct group with particular drivers, motivations and potential solutions.

Those in the encampments are not the benefit-scrounging beggars sometimes portrayed by lazy journalism or misinformed public opinion. As such, different – and new – solutions to avoid the growth of such encampments are needed. That is now the challenge for Commonweal and all in the homelessness and housing sectors. It may require us questioning our previous cosy ideals, norms and solutions; since those solutions have not worked for this group (and probably not for others either).

We need to use this fascinating new research to open our eyes to issues we may have been blind to before, and rise up to this new task. To quote Albert Einstein's view of repeating old mistakes: "Insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results."

At Commonweal, we hope we can help project partners to find new solutions.

Ashley Horsey

Chief Executive, Commonweal Housing Solutions

Foreword - Thames Reach

Thames Reach works with rough sleepers on the streets of London every single night of the year. In recent years, the number of working migrants sleeping rough in London has increased and this has been a growing cause for concern. Rudimentary encampments have arisen, typically in parks, under bridges, in derelict buildings, and on patches of wasteland.

Those living in these encampments tend to have limited support needs and are evidently self-sufficient. Outreach services are confronted with a conspicuous lack of provision for them. However, these encampments raise troubling issues that cannot be ignored. The nature of these informal camps creates an environment which is unsustainable, both for the people living there and the surrounding communities. Furthermore, migrant workers are taking up unregulated, casual jobs that leave them open to exploitation.

The research presented in this report, generously supported by Commonweal, seeks to understand encampment rough sleepers staying at these sites, specifically Romanian nationals on sites in outer north and east London, and to challenge commonly-held assumptions. In particular, the research seeks to understand the motivations and aspirations of this group, and give them an opportunity to talk about the kinds of work and housing they want.

The findings detailed here offer insights into life in London as a working migrant, and help develop our understanding of migrant homelessness. They reveal discrete communities living in the capital, each with their own needs, requiring a range of responses from homeless and statutory services.

This research is not intended to provide all the answers; this is only the beginning of the debate, rather than its conclusion.

Jeremy Swain

Chief Executive, Thames Reach

Executive Summary

In 2016, Thames Reach, a London charity supporting homeless and vulnerable people, was awarded funding from Commonweal Housing to research the situation of people living in encampments in outer north and east London.

The aims of the research were to:
- describe the nature of the problem, including the factors driving migration; the organisation of the encampments; the types of work accessed by the residents; and the options they would be willing to pursue if available
- suggest possible approaches to address this form of homelessness.

The research took place between November 2016 and January 2017. The main element of the research fieldwork comes from interviews with 21 Romanian people staying on encampments in four boroughs: Barking and Dagenham, Barnet, Enfield and Haringey. In this fairly small project it was decided to focus on this specific group, since they are the largest population currently staying on encampments. The researcher, Becky Rice, co-produced this part of the project with a Romanian-speaking outreach worker from the Thames Reach Targeted Rapid Intervention Outreach (TRIO) team, Benjamin Sebok. In addition, the researcher conducted interviews with stakeholders and undertook a desktop review of relevant information.

Background and context

Romania and Bulgaria joined the European Union (EU) in 2007. Initially there were some restrictions on the rights of nationals from these countries to move to the UK and work. However, at the end of 2013, these transitional arrangements were lifted and Romanian nationals were free to come and work in the UK under the Free Movement Directive. Since that time, there has been a large increase in the number of Romanians living in the UK overall, and in the numbers seen rough sleeping in London. In 2015/16, 1,545 Romanians were contacted rough sleeping in London compared to 496 in 2012/13.[1]

Encampments are defined as sites where three or more people are staying in makeshift shelters and tents. Conditions are very poor and sometimes hazardous. The sites are often in large open spaces, wooded areas and around the A406 road. This research focused specifically on sites where Romanians were living because they are the largest group currently staying on encampments.

Data about the number of people living on encampments in outer north and east London at any one time is of limited quality. Information from CHAIN[2] does not provide a complete picture. This is because residents of an encampment are often not all present when outreach workers attend, or they refuse to provide details or come out of their shelters.

Various developments in recent years have affected the rights of EU citizens living in the UK. One of the most significant changes in the context of this research occurred in May 2016 when the Home Office published updated instructions for 'assessing whether to administratively remove an EEA [European Economic Area] national'. 'Administrative removal' is when 'the Home Office enforces [...] removal from the UK if [someone] does not have the right to remain in the UK'.[3] The guidance issued in 2016 identified rough sleeping specifically as an abuse of the 'right to freedom of movement'.[4] New guidance issued in February 2017 specified that enforcement action on the grounds of someone rough sleeping 'must be proportionate, and action should only be taken where it is apparent that the rough sleeper is misusing their right to reside', taking into consideration factors such as whether the individual is taking steps to find accommodation or has been forced to sleep rough due to 'sudden change in circumstances'.[5]

Those living on encampments have little contact with services and the wider community. As evidenced by the interviews below, members of the specific group in question are motivated to come to the UK purely to access work. They are healthy and ready for work, and rarely have support needs requiring services or expectations to access health services and welfare benefits.

TRIO is a pan-London service funded by London Councils to work on encampments and 'hotspots' (sites where three or more people are sleeping rough on the same date). The remit of the team is to support people to access accommodation and work and to improve their health. The TRIO team regularly visits sites to check conditions and the welfare of clients; they also provide advice on the dangers of sleeping rough and the risk of enforcement action. Where possible the team offers some support around employment and accommodation, although the options for this particular group are very limited. Most have No Recourse to Public Funds, for example, because they would not be able to demonstrate continuous periods of employment required to secure Job Seekers Allowance – (JSA) or Housing Benefit. For people wishing to leave the UK, TRIO can provide support with voluntary reconnections (i.e. pay for and support the client to return to their home country or somewhere else they have a connection to).

Findings from client interviews

Profile of interviewees

- Interviews were undertaken with 21 people: 19 men and two women all of working age (from 20 to 61 years). All the interviewees were Romanian. Five described themselves as Romanian Roma, but this could be an underestimate due to reticence about providing ethnic data in light of perceived prejudice against Roma people.
- Interviewees reported very few support needs (drug, alcohol and mental health problems), but two had gambling problems. All were regularly undertaking physically demanding work and appeared to have a good level of physical health.
- People interviewed tended to be resilient and resourceful, making the best of their situation and finding a way to manage with limited facilities, for example accessing showers at local gyms and regularly speaking with family back home.
- Interviewees had not been homeless in their home countries before coming to the UK. Many were working in construction or agriculture back home; this work was very poorly paid and irregular
- Most people were able to read well in their own language, but English language skills among interviewees were generally low.
- Five interviewees had arrived in the UK in 2014 or before. The most common year of arrival was 2015; seven people had first come to London to work in 2016. All but one interviewee had only lived in London since coming to the UK.

Accommodation and sleeping sites

- Most interviewees had not spent all their time in the UK living outside; 18 people had experience of shared accommodation, usually a shared room in very overcrowded, poor conditions. People had often left this type of accommodation when they had run out of money.
- Visits to Romania to see family were common. Most people planned to return home for several weeks during the colder weather (December 2016 to February/March 2017).
- People had learnt where to find an encampment to stay in from friends and family who had already lived on them, when visiting home, and from other Romanian people whom they had met in areas attended to pick up work.
- Interviewees were clear that they had not paid anyone to stay on the encampments and reported that no one is 'in charge'. There was a sense that everyone was independent and able to find a place to get some sleep, as opposed to people talking about there being community or communal life.
- There was no evidence of crossover between the group interviewed for this research and groups

of Romanian people who beg in central London (this was an area of uncertainty in some of the stakeholder interviews, so the researcher and practitioner explored this in some of the later client interviews). Interviewees reported that they had only ever travelled into central London for work; some even commented that they would not know how to get there.

Enforcement action

- Encampments are considered problematic by local and central government because of the unsafe nature of the sites and complaints from local communities about rubbish and anti-social behaviour, for example.
- There has been a drive to stop people congregating to find casual work in some areas. (For example the Public Space Protection Order - PSPO in place in Brent prohibiting people from picking up casual labour in specified areas which has recently been extended until the end of December 2017).[6]
- Over half (13) of the interviewees had experienced encampments being closed down and having to move as a result. Most stated that they looked around for another place in which to set up their sleeping area, usually very close to the location of the original encampment.
- Nearly all this group had had their ID checked by the police while looking for work.

Work

- All the men interviewed primarily worked in construction and labouring roles. This was nearly always 'cash in hand' casual work. Nearly all (18) interviewees found work through word of mouth and by turning up and waiting for work at builders' merchants.
- The average payment was between £40 and £60 per day. People reported that they mainly worked on smaller sites (such as houses and small businesses), but would on occasion work on larger sites.
- There were four male interviewees who mentioned 'legal work'. Two people (from different encampments) had worked in recycling plants, but found this work extremely unpleasant with poor working conditions.
- Exploitation was reported as common for those working 'cash in hand'. Twelve people had one or more times not been paid the agreed amount for the work they had undertaken.
- The two female interviewees' experience of working in the UK had been markedly different from that of the male interviewees. One had a cleaning and housekeeping role in a central London hotel; another was undertaking casual warehouse work packing food. The latter's previous employment had been packing clothes, including for two major high street retailers, where she described conditions as very poor and payment of only £4.50 per hour.
- Interviewees were asked how long their longest period without work had been. Most had only experienced short periods of less than a week out of work.

Money

- Over the past three months most people interviewed had sent home more than £500; eight had sent home more than £1,000.
- Interviewees were asked what they were saving money for or what they spent it on. Nearly all (18 of the 21) interviewees were supporting people in Romania; usually children and a spouse. Most cited the everyday basic needs - such as food, fuel and clothing - of their dependants as the main use of their income. Ten also said they were using money to improve their homes in Romania. Those sending money back home said that it made a huge impact on the lives of their dependants.
- Those without dependants had not managed to save money.

Potential areas of support

- All interviewees said they would welcome support to find accommodation (i.e. a room). People were also interested in support to help them find legal work in or outside London, and to access bank

accounts and National Insurance (NI) numbers if they did not have them.
- Provided they were working, interviewees would be willing to pay for a room, on average, between £201 and £300 a month including bills; equivalent to between £7-10 a night. Interviewees would be willing to share a room with one other person. People frequently clarified that they would only be able to pay this amount if they had regular work.

Motivation, plans and perception of life in London
- All interviewees identified extreme poverty and lack of opportunity as the push factors for leaving Romania and access to relatively well-paid, unskilled work as the pull factor for coming to London.
- Nearly all respondents said they would stay in the UK 'for as long as I can' or 'as long as I am allowed'. Most did not have detailed plans for the future, but rather focused on earning money on a week-to-week basis.
- Most felt their move to the UK had been successful.

Key recommendations

1. Homelessness services should consider how they could assist EU migrants living on encampments to access basic accommodation and move away from the informal labour market. Support with accessing accommodation must be paired with proactive efforts to help people move into legal employment and the promotion of legal advice services available to migrants.
2. Services targeting EU migrants living on encampments should take into account the current demands on clients – for example providing opportunities to access advice outside of working hours and making available Romanian-speaking staff.
3. For accommodation to be suitable for this group it would need to be flexible (probably paid on a nightly or weekly basis) at around £8 a night. Room sharing (preferably with just one other person) and shared toilets and showers would be acceptable.
4. The police and the TRIO team should continue to monitor encampments, undertaking basic checks on the welfare of clients where possible. Health and safety considerations for outreach workers should be regularly reviewed.
5. Expecting or seeking high-quality information about this client group is to be avoided: it would be costly and without clear advantages. However, bringing together the available intelligence across boroughs on a regular basis may provide a clearer picture without being excessively expensive.
6. Where action is planned to close down encampments, this should be done using a cross-borough approach to avoid displacement of those people staying on encampments.
7. This research focuses on a specific group of people who are in good health and able to work on a regular basis. Thames Reach is concerned that there are other more vulnerable groups living on different encampment sites who are at more immediate risk of harm from rough sleeping due to support needs such as heavy alcohol use and lack of income or greater exploitation at work. Further investigation into these groups should be undertaken. A more sophisticated understanding of cohorts within the population of EU nationals rough sleeping in London would be beneficial in developing service responses and informing policy.
8. The homelessness sector should consider options for raising the profile of issues around the exploitation of migrant workers by employers through policy and influencing work. This should include submission of this report and other relevant information to the Independent Review of Employment Practices in the Modern Economy being undertaken for the Department of Business, Industry and Industrial Strategy (DBIIS).[7]
9. While there was no evidence of modern slavery having been experienced amongst research participants, recent research has highlighted this issue in the UK including amongst homeless Romanian people. Services must remain vigilant and be equipped to identify this.[8]

Endnotes

[1] Source: CHAIN data provided by the CHAIN team St Mungo's. Note: figure may differ slightly from previously published figures due to retrospective updates to client data.
[2] CHAIN is a GLA-funded database used by those working with rough sleepers to record information about their work.
[3] Right to Remain Toolkit (accessed January 2017): www.righttoremain.org.uk
[4] Home Office European Economic Area administrative removal: consideration and decision instructions for assessing whether to administratively remove a European Economic Area (EEA) national. Version 2 (May 2016) See: (Reg 19 (3) (c))
[5] Home Office European Economic Area administrative removal: consideration and decision instructions for assessing whether to administratively remove a European Economic Area (EEA) national. Version 3 (February 2017) See: (Reg 23 (6) (c))
[6] A PSPO is 'an order that identifies the public place and prohibits specified things being done in the restricted area… Failure to comply with a PSPO is an offence': www.asbhelp.co.uk (accessed February 2017).
[7] https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/employment-practices-in-the-modern-economy (accessed March 2017).
[8] Keast M (2017) Understanding and Responding to Modern Slavery within the Homelessness Sector, The Passage.

Acknowledgments

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