

In the soup



Are soup kitchens a good thing? **Anne Power** and **Laura Lane** describe LSE research that informs this debate and continues the tradition of the great LSE academic, Professor Peter Townsend, who died earlier this year.

Dating back to the Middle Ages, 'soup runs' have provided food on the streets to the needy or homeless. And just as the poor have always been with us, so has the controversy about providing for their needs in this way.

Today, issues such as whether soup runs perpetuate the problem of homelessness, as well as having a negative effect on the neighbourhoods where they operate, are particularly relevant to the central London borough of Westminster – which had more people sleeping rough in 2004 than the rest of the city put together. As Christmas looms, these issues are once again of concern to charities and residents.

To understand what actually happens in areas where 'soup runs' operate, Crisis (the national charity for single homeless people), Westminster City Council and Communities and Local Government commissioned LSE Housing to provide an independent and objective perspective on soup runs in the borough, based on talking to soup run providers, users and the organisations that support and help homeless people.

The research was able to draw on data from the Combined Homelessness and Information Network (CHAIN) which charts the ebb and flow of people onto and off the streets. In 2008 its outreach teams in Westminster had contact with 1,633 people. Of

those, 454 were 'long term' rough sleepers, meaning that they had been sleeping on the streets for two consecutive years; 913 were classified as 'flow' or first time rough sleepers; 266 were 'returners' who had returned to sleeping rough after an absence of at least one year.

What makes Westminster so appealing to this disproportionate number of rough sleepers? London has, of course, the appeal of a big capital city and it is also a major transportation hub with Westminster at its heart. In addition, Westminster has a large concentration of services for homeless and vulnerable people and some may find it comforting to sleep in an area where there are other people bedded down. Understandably, many have pointed to the high level of soup runs operating in the borough as a major attraction. But it seems to be a somewhat circular problem.

In 2007 the Soup Run Forum, a grouping of providers who aim to support homeless people on the streets, found 29 groups active in Westminster in one week and estimated that there were between 30 and 40 operating but that many of these did not go out frequently. More recently there has been increasing coordination among organisations which operate soup runs.

These mobile food services have faced criticisms – it has been argued that they help to sustain potentially

damaging street lifestyles and, indirectly, support drug or alcohol addictions. Their approach of offering food and clothing on a 'no questions asked' basis is in contrast to the mainstream statutory services – such as day centres – which have become focused not just on providing basic services but also on moving people off the streets.

LSE Housing researchers spoke to over 100 soup run users and 30 homeless service providers. We found that people using soup runs did so mainly to fulfil the basic needs of food, drink and clothing, but also for social contact, a daily routine and support out of hours when other services are closed. We also found that it was not just rough sleepers that used the service, but vulnerably housed and excluded people as well.

David, a British man in his 50s, was one of the people we interviewed. He has been on the streets for a number of years and uses soup runs on a regular basis. He said: 'People do depend on them to survive. There are different bottom lines for different people, for example some couldn't beg but could shoplift. If soup runs were to stop they would need to be replaced with something better.'

This sentiment was echoed by Ludwik from Poland. He said that he uses soup runs for a 'source of life' and that without them people would suffer. 'It would be a tragedy for the people who are new to being homeless. For those who have been here longer they know how to manage on the streets.'

We found that most organisations that provide soup runs are committed to providing food on the streets for as long as it is needed. The role of faith seems to

be central to the ethos and approach of most of the soup runs, which are largely staffed by volunteers. One volunteer explains: 'It's the interpretation of what you read in the gospel – being humane to a fellow man. It is not an exclusively Christian mission.' Such volunteers see themselves as offering not only food, but companionship and support in a more informal way than many professional services do.

Residents living close to soup runs expressed worries about them, including anti-social behaviour, the creation of 'no-go' areas and litter. They suggested that soup runs be moved from residential areas, believing that there were better alternatives than handing out free food on the streets.

One of our recommendations is that soup runs should be encouraged to disperse away from such a heavy concentration in central London. There should be increased day centre provision, particularly during evenings and weekends, and free food in churches that already open their doors to homeless people.

There also needs to be better coordination between soup runs to reduce duplication of work and over-provision, as well as more direct collaboration between soup runs, outreach services and the police.

A more rapid response to people newly arrived on the streets would also prevent them becoming entrenched in the street-based lifestyle. Further, to prevent people returning to the streets, those who were once homeless but are now housed need increased support.

There is an urgent need for action to deal with the complex social needs of destitute migrants, such as Ludwik, with no recourse to public funds, and of those, such as David, who have fallen through the social cracks in our society – without action to address these needs many individuals will and do already become isolated, vulnerable, and homeless, forming a steady stream onto the streets. ■



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Peter Townsend

Peter Townsend, an outstanding professor of social policy at LSE, who died on 7 June 2009, was my most inspiring teacher when I came to the School as a graduate student in the 1960s, writes Anne Power. He remained a role model ever since – always pushing the boundaries of the possible to benefit the most disadvantaged.

Throughout his life he argued that we should judge the quality of our own society by how we treat its least fortunate members. I will never forget how he made us students feel we could change the world. At the time of his death he knew how much there was still to do. I like to think that the report, *Soup Runs in Central London: the right help in the right place at the right time?*, is in the Townsend tradition – and chimes with his lifelong fight against poverty and exclusion.

See lse.ac.uk/socialPolicy/PeterTownsendTribute.aspx for tributes to Professor Townsend from colleagues, students and friends.



The report *Soup Runs in Central London: the right help in the right place at the right time?* is available from LSE Housing in the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, see sticerd.lse.ac.uk/lsehousing

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