

Goodies for baddies

Claire Whitfield tells how a city's rough sleeping problem was solved – despite a wall of discrimination against chaotic drug users

EXETER is a small city with a high, visible rough sleeper population in relation to its size. In 2001, Exeter Drugs Project was commissioned to provide specialist treatment to rough sleepers who were engaged in regular and problematic substance misuse, to ensure that they moved permanently off the streets. EDP was allocated £65,000 to pay for detox, rehabilitation and support. The council paid for an extra member of staff to be seconded to the project for three days a week. We worked closely with the contact and assessment outreach team, which had two staff, and with a social worker from the primary health care team for the homeless – forming a virtual multi-disciplinary team.

RAPPORT

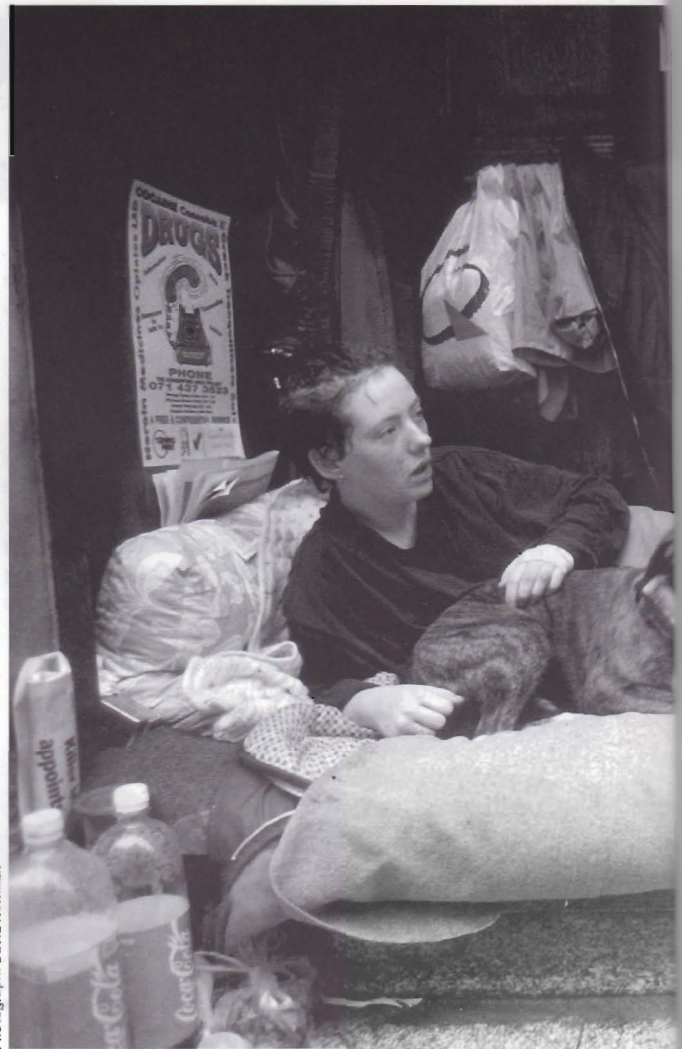
A list of people who had been rough sleeping in Exeter for six months or more and who were not engaging with services was identified. The drugs worker went on outreach to meet the clients, explain the service on offer, and to develop a rapport. Informal initial assessments were carried out on the street. The first client targeted was the one who was most at risk. He was a femoral injector of heroin who had an untreated deep vein thrombosis, was unable to walk, and had a dog. For each client, a lead worker was identified to co-ordinate the multi-agency approach to guard against gaps in communication and provision.

The drugs worker followed an 'assertive' approach – working very intensively with only two to three individuals at a time. Interventions included harm reduction advice and information, gaining access to primary care via the homelessness surgery, referring into the local statutory drug service, providing a needle exchange service, referring quickly into private detox and rehabilitation facilities and paying for dogs to be put in kennels for the duration of treatment.

BARRIERS

During the course of the project, there were many barriers to overcome. The level of discrimination this client group suffered was quite shocking. There were waves of resentment from other professionals, even within Exeter Drugs Project: this client group was seen as somehow undeserving of special treatment or extra funds. The phrase 'goodies for baddies' was used by some to describe the rough sleeping project. Other professionals did not seem to understand how socially excluded rough sleepers are and did not understand the need for a proactive, properly resourced approach.

Claire Whitfield was an outreach worker at the EDP, and is now head of Adult Community Services



Photograph: David Hoffman

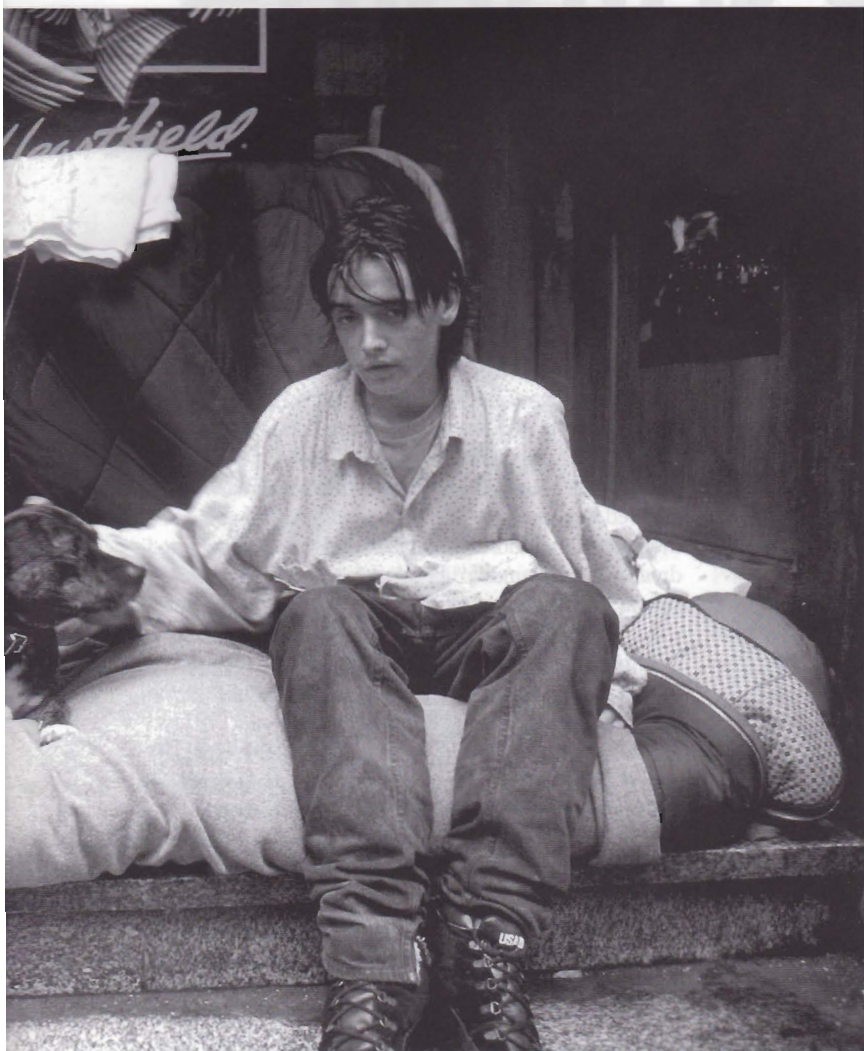
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Behind these attitudes, there was a mistaken belief that this client group are not 'motivated' and that the funding would be wasted. The team had to challenge the idea that if a client does not turn up for an appointment, they are by definition not motivated. It quickly became apparent that the way an individual's motivation is measured could be a barrier to treatment. One example of this was a man who had been refused funding for residential treatment because he had difficulty complying with community treatment. This project funded him and he has been the best success story to date.

DOGGED WORK

As in many areas of the country, there was a waiting list at the local statutory agency for medical interventions and community care funding. The team acted as advocates for clients by highlighting the risks they faced and the need for prioritisation. The statutory agency was encouraged not to close cases if

helping the “undeserving” homeless



the client did not attend and to be more flexible around treatment outcomes. We saw the benefits of harm reduction interventions and simply retaining clients in treatment by maintaining contact. One social worker came out early in the morning to conduct an assessment before the client in question was too intoxicated to participate in it.

Many clients had dogs with nowhere to leave them should they go into treatment. We found only one rehab which would accept people with dogs. Luckily, we were able to pay for kennels. The city's hostels would not accept dogs at the beginning of this project – they have now reassessed this policy, enabling dog owners to come indoors.

So what worked? Our relationship with the clients was the single most important thing. We were able to spend time with them – we made contact daily, if not several times a day, and we kept the clients informed and engaged. Good relationships with other agencies had to be worked at, especially as they were being challenged to be flexible in the services they were providing.

CREDIBILITY

An assertive approach mattered. We didn't give up and used a creative approach with regular problem solving and quick action. It was important to maintain momentum by being in constant contact with clients and to make sure they got to important appointments. Credibility also mattered. Clients were initially cynical about what could be offered – they had heard it all before and were not prepared to wait for treatment. By putting money where our mouths were, quick access to treatment was offered. When word got around, rough sleepers were approaching the service and asking for treatment.

The resource of over £65,000 meant action could be fast – getting people into private treatment without too much of a wait. Temporary B&B accommodation and respite accommodation were all paid for. Successful outcomes were achieved because this project was resource intensive. Money talks and other agencies took notice of what was being attempted.

Without doubt, this was a high profile project with political clout within the city, with government officials visiting and checking if the project was on target. This prompted other agencies to develop more flexible working practices and adopt a more dynamic approach to meet the needs of this client group.

Exeter Update the problem returns

FAST forward to the present and Exeter's rough sleeping problem has returned – bad news for the government in the wake of its £200 million drive to reduce the number of rough sleepers in the UK by two thirds between 1999–2002. A street count carried out in the Devon city at the end of April revealed the number of rough sleepers had crept up to 18 – close to the street population before the Rough Sleepers' Initiative (RSI) kicked in.

Nicola Glassbrook, assertive outreach team manager at the Exeter Drugs Project, says the good work achieved by the RSI in reducing the number of rough sleepers from around 25 to seven has ground to a halt. “We have seen a fresh wave of rough sleepers come into Exeter. These are not the people who were helped by the RSI and have fallen back through the system. Some have been excluded from hostels because of drugs, others have moved to the city from rural areas of Devon”.

“Now the RSI money has been taken away we haven't got the tools to offer them a complete service, it's frustrating. It becomes difficult to become assertive if you have nothing to offer people, like quick access to drug treatment. One year on and rough sleeping is again a big issue in Exeter.” ■