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# The European Consensus Conference on Homelessness – Reflections of a Pleasantly Surprised Sceptic

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## Introduction

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I interpreted my brief here as having been asked for very much a personal view on the Policy Recommendations of the Jury for the European Consensus Conference on Homelessness (ECCH), albeit informed by research evidence where appropriate. This viewpoint is predominantly, though not exclusively, informed by my rootedness in the UK, and particularly the Scottish, context.

To begin with, it is probably worth being transparent with regard to my scepticism about the whole concept of a Consensus Conference, which appears to constitute an attempt to transplant a ‘medical’ model of knowledge development into the social sciences. This carries the obvious risk of encapsulating a naïve and deeply unfashionable form of ‘positivism’ – the notion that there is one uniform social ‘truth’ that we can uncover if only we use the right methodological tools (Hollis, 1999). Generations of social constructionists have challenged this epistemological position, establishing a new orthodoxy in much social science, which admits of ‘multiple social realities’ and asserts the equal validity of different (including conflicting) perspectives (Williams and May, 1996). However, I myself find critical realism a more convincing position; this acknowledges the existence of an underlying social reality and posits that some perceptions of this reality are likely to be better-informed, and therefore more valid, than others, but also that we cannot know this reality directly, so that all knowledge is ‘fallible’ and open to challenge, and we must be prepared to change our position when the evidence requires it (Sayer, 2000). Both constructionists and realists – but not positivists – would be sceptical about the underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions of the ECCH.

A more common-sense way of putting this scepticism would be: why should we assume that there would be a consensus? What happens if some of us, in good faith, happen to disagree? Surely the best route to rigour is open and honest debate, so that in the 'market place of ideas' we should all set out our stall as best we can in the hope of persuading others of the merit of our position, but accepting that they are entitled to disagree if they remain unconvinced. Of course, robust debate is aided enormously if we begin by identifying those areas of genuine consensus, so that they can be set to one side, and focus debating energies on areas of genuine disagreement (rather than misunderstanding). To impose the necessity of coming to a consensus from the outset sets alarm bells ringing for me; will it lead to 'lowest common denominator' compromises that can deliver only bland, empty statements impossible to disagree with as they are so devoid of substantive content, necessitating a blunting of rigour and clear lines of argument, a muddying of waters, abandonment of precision, and a kind of corporatist 'horse trading' to keep everyone on board?

I have to say that, given this scepticism, I am pleasantly surprised by the outcome of the Consensus Conference. There is far more by way of substance in the Jury recommendations than I would have anticipated, making it a far more useful and interesting process than I would have thought possible. That is not to say that I agree with all of these conclusions and recommendations – as will become clear below – but that's OK. In keeping with the realist position summarised above, I think disagreement and debate on these social issues is healthy and to be expected, and properly harnessed (i.e. eliminating ill-founded ideas and retaining ones with merit), enables us to move closer to a 'truth' that will always remain out of reach in an absolute sense, but is nonetheless the only thing worth striving towards.

I will now consider each of the key recommendations in turn.

### **Key question 1: What does homelessness mean?**

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The Jury recommends adoption of ETHOS, and I agree. ETHOS appears genuinely to command a great deal of agreement across many EU countries (though it has had little impact in the UK thus far, and certainly not in England). Thus, this seems an area of real consensus that can provide a framework for moving forward. For me, the key strength of ETHOS has been not as a means of imposing a uniform definition – institutional and cultural divergence render this extremely problematic – but rather as a framework through which to provide transparency and clarity on what different countries do and do not consider to constitute homelessness. It is extremely helpful in this regard and will rightly lie at the heart of attempts to move forward in addressing homelessness across Europe.

## Key question 2: Ending homelessness: a realistic objective?

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I am very supportive of the Jury's emphasis on moving away from 'managing' to 'ending' homeless, certainly at the level of individual homeless people. The Jury considered the idea that homelessness cannot be ended because some people 'choose' to become and stay homeless; unsurprisingly, they reject this view. I have always suspected that this is a bit of a 'straw man' argument; in almost 20 years of research in this field in the UK I have yet to come across anyone who claims that people make a free choice to become homeless. The far subtler –and defensible – point often made is that homeless people sometimes perceive the streets, or various insecure forms of housing, to be the 'best of a bad bunch' of unpleasant options available to them, and they can become immersed in a sub-culture in order to survive on the streets that is then difficult to break out of. However, there is ample research in the UK, and I am sure elsewhere, that shows that, with the right combination of person-centred and assertive support, and sufficient resources, the homeless state of even the most 'entrenched' and chaotic rough sleepers can be resolved. So, I agree with the Jury that the argument for rejecting the notion of ending homelessness is not a good one, even if I don't think it's a serious argument in the first place.

I think a far more legitimate objection to the goal of ending homelessness is that you cannot eliminate entirely the flow of people into homelessness, as there will always be relationship breakdowns, domestic violence, and emergencies of various kinds. The more realistic goal is to prevent homelessness occurring wherever possible, and to minimise the length of time and impact of homelessness where it does, unavoidably, occur. While the Jury appears to take this view too, highlighting the inescapability of inflows into homelessness, this does not sit logically with their assertion that it can be '*ultimately ended*' (maybe an example of the fudging required to get all to agree?).

In fact, I think a better question than whether ending homelessness is a 'realistic' goal, is whether it is a 'helpful' one. In some recent research I have been involved with, which has examined the possibilities for 'ending' youth homelessness in the UK, none of those interviewed actually felt that it was possible to end homelessness amongst young people, but some did think that this was nonetheless a helpful goal to focus energies, raise profiles and protect resources. Others took the view that it was an unhelpful goal and would lead to re-labelling or the disguising of young homeless people's problems. Either way, its helpfulness, rather than realism, was the most interesting part of the debate.

I would like to pick up on the emphasis on Scottish developments in particular here, as this is an area where I have a specific interest. At a recent conference with homelessness policy-makers and front-line practitioners in Scotland, I mentioned that I had heard it said on various occasions in the European context that Scotland is

aiming to 'end homelessness' in 2012 – cue gales of laughter all round the room (I wasn't even trying to make a joke!). While this 'ending homelessness' rhetoric is also occasionally used in the Scottish context, it is not, and never has been, what 2012 is actually about. Its focus is far more specific and narrower, though ambitious enough. It is to abolish one of five criteria that determine access to the main statutory homelessness duty – to be secured 'settled' housing by a local authority. Traditionally, 'priority need' has been the main rationing device for access to this entitlement and the target for 2012 is to eliminate this criterion (but the other four rationing criteria – eligibility, homelessness, intentionality and local connection – will stay intact!).

So, 2012 is mainly about addressing the need for settled accommodation of those who have already become homeless (albeit that duties still exist to those threatened with homelessness within two months). In order to end homelessness you would have to prevent it arising in the first place, and in this, Scotland has actually been something of a laggard when compared to England. Since 2003, England has engaged in a vigorous process of homelessness prevention that has led to a dramatic fall in statutory homelessness, but Scotland has been far more cautious and experimental, in part because of fears of 'gatekeeping' (i.e. denying people their legal rights) that have caused concern in England. Just recently, with the 2012 target looming fast and the numbers of those accepted as being owed main duty rising so fast that they are absorbing the majority of social housing allocations in many parts of the country, the Scottish Government has become serious about prevention, investing in a series of homelessness prevention regional 'hubs' and strongly promoting the English 'housing options' model. It looks a promising approach but it is early days, and its success or otherwise is yet to be seen.

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<sup>1</sup> The Jury appears to have misunderstood an important matter of fact regarding changes to the intentionality legislation in Scotland. The changes they describe are on the statute book but have not been brought into force, and it now seems unlikely that they ever will be brought into force, with the focus now exclusively on the 2012 abolition of priority need. It may also be worth noting that the Jury appears to have misinterpreted the concept of intentionality as being related in some way to the debate about 'lifestyle choices' in becoming homeless (echoing a similar misunderstanding that I have often heard voiced by European colleagues regarding this concept). Intentionality has nothing to do with this debate, and everything to do with controlling 'perverse incentives' with respect to the priority access to council housing implied by the statutory homelessness framework in the UK. As the definitive legal text on UK homelessness legislation comments – the intentionality test was introduced to "...*allay fears of some local authorities and MPs that individuals would attempt to improve their housing conditions by voluntarily giving up accommodation in order to be housed before others on the council waiting list.*" (Robson and Poustie, 1996, p.151)

### **Key question 3: Are ‘housing-led’ policy approaches the most effective methods of preventing and tackling homelessness?**

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Here, the Jury calls for a shift from using shelters and transitional accommodation as the predominant solution to homelessness towards ‘housing led’ approaches. This means increasing access to permanent housing, and increasing capacity for both prevention and the provision of adequate floating support to people in their homes according to their needs. I could not agree more, and this is a very important and very concrete outcome of the Jury’s deliberations. My one word of caution would be that some of the most powerful evidence in this field – certainly on Housing First models – comes from the US, and it is important to generate robust evidence from within the EU to inform what may be a very profound shift away from the current dominant transitional model of ‘managing’ homelessness and homeless people. This need for a European evidence base is also noted by the Jury.

### **Key question 4: How can meaningful participation of homeless people in the development of homelessness policies be assured?**

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Empowering homeless people to take control of their lives and choices is a crucial but complex goal, which encompasses everything from building positive social relationships to gaining access to adequate income and labour market opportunities, making available appropriate and sustainable housing and living circumstances, and much else besides. In the question above, however, the goal of empowerment seems limited to participation in the development of homelessness policy, which seems a very narrow and rather misjudged focus. While it goes without saying that homelessness policies and practices should be informed by homeless people’s views, experiences and perspectives, this may relate to consultation of various kinds, as well as full-blown participation. I can appreciate the good intentions behind the question as posed here, but it risks creating an ongoing ‘homeless identity’ for those involved (Kennedy and Fitzpatrick, 2001), counter to the desire to ‘end homelessness’. Also, there is a danger of narrowing focus to the involvement of (inevitably) a small number of homeless people in the policy process, rather than a more comprehensive and inclusive form of empowerment that enhances the ‘capability’ of all homeless people to live their own version of the good life (Sen, 1992). To be fair, these points are all acknowledged by the Jury in their careful discussion of the complexities of empowerment, and their recommendations are far more helpful and wide-ranging – focusing on a shift from treating homeless people as passive recipients to emphasising their rights and autonomy – than the narrow phrasing of this question would lead you to expect.

### **Key question 5: To what extent should people be able to access homeless services irrespective of their legal status and citizenship?**

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I am very pleased to see the emphasis here on the need for the EU to take responsibility in this area, and the need for better data and knowledge on the links between homelessness and migration. This is undoubtedly a growing and very serious problem, and clearly it is morally unacceptable for anyone to be left destitute in Europe, regardless of legal status. However, there are some very tricky normative questions to be addressed here about a State's right to guard its borders, and the limits to what a State can be expected to provide for non-citizens (especially undocumented migrants), as well as practical questions about the appropriate role of homelessness agencies. Research in which I am currently engaged, on multiple exclusion homelessness in the UK, suggests that the needs of migrants using low threshold homelessness and other services in UK cities differ profoundly from those of indigenous UK citizens using these services; the causes of their situations are far more 'structural' and less 'personal' in nature. Asking homelessness agencies that were set up for one purpose to address quite a different phenomenon is problematic. This is an area where there does need to be a proper EU-wide review and strategy, as similar problems are being reported across a wide range of EU countries, and, as the Jury acknowledges, these serious social problems are directly linked in many respects to EU policies and the legal framework on free movement of EU citizens.

### **Key question 6: What should be the elements of an EU homelessness strategy?**

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The prior question of '*Should there be an EU strategy on homelessness?*' seems to me to be missing here. I remain unconvinced, as I have been for many years (Fitzpatrick, 1998) that there ought to be such a supra-national strategy, as I struggle to see what a concrete, meaningful and helpful EU-wide strategy could look like. As our recent EC study suggested (Stephens *et al.*, 2010) that homelessness and the structures that generate and deal with it differ profoundly between different EU countries, an EU strategy (if it had any substance) would risk being a crude top-down exercise that would ill fit all countries.

This is not to say that the EU does not have a crucial role to play in encouraging, supporting and facilitating countries in developing their own national, regional and local homelessness strategies; on the contrary, its role can be critical. This came across to me very strongly in the recent Peer Review of the Portuguese National Homelessness Strategy in which I was involved (Fitzpatrick, 2011). It became clear

that EU frameworks and so on had provided crucial ammunition for those seeking to move policy forward in this area, particularly in those countries with more limited or recent policies in this area. Thus the ‘voluntary’ mechanisms provided under the Social OMC – a strong research agenda, peer reviews, Social Inclusion reports, mutual learning and transnational exchanges, etc. – can be enormously helpful sources of ‘soft power’ for pushing for progressive change in such countries. It can help to provide key ‘tools’ – methodological, evidential and financial – that countries can apply in their own specific context. The EU also has a specific role to play in its areas of competence, including immigration and asylum. However, a prescriptive EU-wide policy on homelessness seems a folly to me, and a dangerous one at that. Again, to be fair, the Jury seems to acknowledge this in declining to fix a single headline target at EU level for ending homelessness, and the elements of the EU strategy that they outline are at very broad-brush level; this approach enables Member States to adapt homelessness strategies to their own circumstances as required.

## Conclusion

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The Consensus Conference appears to have been a worthwhile and concrete exercise – much more so, perhaps, than we sceptics would have anticipated. This is testament to the hard work not only of the Jury, but also of the preparatory committee, all those who gave evidence and provided background documents, the conference participants, and the organisations that supported it. It will undoubtedly provide a powerful point of reference for years to come in the development of national and supra-national policies in this area, and rightly so. Personally, I agree with some of the Jury’s conclusions and disagree with others – that is right and proper and how it should be. The most important thing is that they have managed to move beyond trite rhetoric to matters of substance for us all to get our ‘teeth into’. It has therefore provided a very useful function in pushing the debate onwards. As with most EU initiatives, it will likely have a more profound impact in the smaller and newer Member States than some of the larger and more established Member States (certainly I will be surprised if much or any heed is paid to it in the UK, and particularly in England), but such uneven effects are also to be expected and all positive gains are to be welcomed, even where not spread equally across the EU.

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