
Perceptions of Participants and Stakeholders of a 'Sleepout' Event Held to Raise Money for, and Awareness of, Homelessness Charity Work

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- **Abstract_** *Fundraising events have become a dominant platform for charities in raising money to deliver services for vulnerable population groups. 'Sleepout' events are unique, whereby participants spend one night in a sleeping bag or cardboard shelter, raising awareness and money for homelessness charities. These events have become increasingly popular, particularly in the UK, US, Canada, and Australia. The present study documents evidence from, as far as can be ascertained, the first study to explore the perceptions of participants regarding sleepout events, including staff from housing and homelessness services, and people with lived experience of sleeping on the street. Whilst most participants had a favourable view of these events in raising awareness and funds for charity, there was, however, a degree of ambivalence about sleeping outside for one night as the vehicle for fundraising. Many recognised that a single, safely organised outdoor event does not replicate the experiences of street-based sleeping. Therefore, some support staff expressed a very strong and visceral dislike of these events as misleading and distasteful. Recommendations were made that more consideration should be given to education and awareness raising during the events to ensure participants understand more of the complexity of the issues surrounding homelessness, and the most effective evidence-based solutions.*
- **Key words_** *Charity, sponsorship, fundraising, sleepout, homelessness, street homelessness*

Introduction

Estimates of the numbers of individuals experiencing homelessness and of the costs to society of homelessness remain difficult to assess accurately. However, recent research, based on official statistics indicates at least 271 000 people are recorded as homeless in England, including 123 000 children, in 2023 (Shelter, 2023a). Findings suggest that one in 208 people in England are without a home. Of these, 2 400 people are sleeping on the street on any given night, 15 000 people are in hostels or supported accommodation, and nearly 250 000 people are living in temporary accommodation – most of whom are families. Costs associated with hospital admission for those with ‘no fixed abode’ are thought to be £18 million per year in England (McCormick and White, 2016). A 2015 report ‘At What Costs?’ estimated that a single person sleeping on the street in the UK typically costs the public purse £20 128 each per year (Crisis, 2015). These costs are largely attributed to the NHS and the criminal justice system and are reportedly higher for those with the greatest and most complex needs. Costs to the individuals and families are significant, and include poorer educational outcomes, physical, and mental health, including a significantly reduced average life expectancy of 45 years for men and 43 years for women experiencing homelessness in comparison to the wider population of 76 years for men and 81 years for women (Office for National Statistics, 2021). The same challenges, in terms of levels of street-based sleeping and homelessness, and lack of sufficient public service responses, are faced in many countries. In the past 10 years, homelessness in EU countries has risen dramatically with a 70% increase in the size of their homeless populations. Studies have revealed that at least 700 000 people are homeless on a given night across the EU (FEANTSA, 2019).

Despite shelter being an essential basic need, there is a paradox in the United Kingdom (UK), one of the richest societies in the world, which appears to be unable to provide an effective or efficient housing solution for many of its citizens. In 2021-2022, £2.186 billion was spent by local authorities in England, the largest of the UK nations, on ‘housing’, including £314 million on ‘homelessness’ prevention services (Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities, 2022). Although not part of service expenditure, housing benefits are a large component of total local authority spending. Housing benefits are a means-tested benefit paid for by local councils to help support individuals currently on low incomes to pay for rents in both private and social housing, financed through subsidies from the Department for Work and Pensions. Housing benefits expenditure was £14 billion in 2021-2022.

O’Sullivan (2010) has suggested that the literature is clear that less generous welfare states have higher rates of homelessness. Many who work in or study the subject of housing and homelessness argue that addressing the issue via government

policy and government-led welfare is both the right thing to do and is also more effective at reducing homelessness (Local Government Association, 2020). However, the reality is that in many European countries, government welfare provision has been reduced in recent years. In the UK, an era of austerity has led to significant, and uneven, reductions in spending across many elements of the welfare state. The biggest cuts have been to budgets for local authorities (Gray and Barford, 2018), a key provider of housing solutions and support. Additionally, the data above shows that despite significant amounts continuing to be spent on elements of welfare which are designed to support individuals to access housing, homelessness remains a significant issue in the UK as in many other countries. O'Sullivan (2020) has more recently noted that most homelessness is not long-term and is not ultimately about individual issues such as mental health problems or substance use. He argues that we need to rethink homelessness as a pattern of residential instability and economic precariousness regularly experienced by marginal households.

In the UK, economic precarity and lack of affordable housing have been increasing perniciously in recent years. For example, the amount of 'social housing' available in England has been in steady decline for decades. In 2023, an estimate suggested that 200 000 of the most affordable social housing units had been lost in a decade (Chartered Institute of Housing, 2023). House building has increased somewhat in recent years but remains lower than at any point between the 1950s and the 1970s (Full Fact, 2023) and is nowhere near the level required to keep up with increasing populations and demographic changes. In terms of economic precarity. The UK Government's own figures show that almost one in 10 of the workforce (9.7%) are in precarious work (Gov.uk) and those on zero-hour contracts and other forms of unreliable or precarious work are much more likely to be in groups already marginalised in other ways, including migrants, women, and younger adults (Clark and Wenham, 2022). On top of those factors, the unexpected increase in inflation since 2022 has significantly increased already high housing costs for many of those already struggling with economic precarity.

These factors help to explain why welfare support is unlikely to be sufficient to prevent homelessness without affordable and secure housing and economic security.

Given all of the above, we are faced with the current reality that homelessness is increasing in the UK, state welfare provision is decreasing, and a significant source of support for many individuals and families experiencing homelessness is the charity, or third sector. The UK has the largest charitable giving market in Europe (StiftungSchweiz, 2021). In the UK, major charities such as Shelter, Crisis, Centrepont, and the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) provide services

and support for individuals and families experiencing housing crises and/or homelessness. Some of these organisations also carry out significant work in research and policy development in relation to housing issues (Crisis, 2023; Shelter, 2023b).

The sector relies heavily on fundraising from the public for a significant amount of its income. During the global COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020 – December 2021), charities faced unprecedented challenges, where many experienced negative impacts on their service delivery, financing, staffing, and access to volunteers (Charity Commission, 2021). Despite these challenges, charitable donations increased in the UK in 2020, linked to the pandemic and its aftermath; however, since then, people have reported giving less to charity (Charities Aid Foundation, 2022; 2023). Such a finding is perhaps unsurprising given the 2023 cost-of-living crisis, and further squeezed incomes for most people. Animal welfare remains the most popular cause that people donate to and raise money for. Twenty-eight percent of UK donors reported donations to such causes in the past four weeks, in 2022 (Charities Aid Foundation, 2022). Numbers donating to charities supporting people experiencing homelessness and/or housing and refuge shelters are also significant, but have seen a downward trajectory in recent years, falling from 20% in 2019 to 16% in 2022 (Charities Aid Foundation, 2022), even though homelessness continues to rise across the UK.

In contemporary societies, charities have had to adapt to a changing world and to become more market-oriented and entrepreneurial to survive and thrive (Buckingham, 2012). One aspect of this shift is a move toward sponsored fundraising events. Whilst more people donate money directly to charity, 5% of individuals report sponsoring someone for a charity event (Charities Aid Foundation, 2022). Fundraising events have now become a significant source of income generation for many charities. Sporting events, such as marathons and cycle rides, are the most popular fundraising vehicles and flagship activities for raising money via sponsored participation. Since the inception of the London Marathon in 1981, over £1 billion has been raised for charities, with a World Record achieved for a single event raising approximately £66 million in 2019, and in 2022 the amount was still £58 million.

In the case of housing and homelessness charities, sponsored charity 'sleepout' events have also become a significant fundraising event, unique to that sector. Participants spend one night outside, in a sleeping bag or constructed cardboard box shelter, seeking to raise awareness of homelessness. Whilst the exact known origins of these events are unclear, it is evident that such events have become increasingly popular, in the UK, US, Canada, and Australia (O'Sullivan, 2020). They are less common in Europe, although several European cities have taken part in "The World's Big Sleepout" (The World's Big Sleepout, 2019). In the UK, events have

recruited high profile individuals, including Prince William, who took part in 2009 (Guardian, 2009). As well as raising money for charities, these events are aimed at raising awareness of homelessness. There is a logic to using such events for fundraising for housing and homelessness charities, because previous research has suggested that a person who has a desire to raise funds for a specific charity may be more attracted to an event that allows them to engage in a personally meaningful activity, and an activity which is directly linked to the work of the charity is therefore more likely to attract support (Wood et al., 2010; White et al., 2023).

Fundraising events do not take place without criticism and some counterproductive elements. Several authors have assessed in more detail the use of sports events for fundraising and the whole phenomenon of what has been termed 'fitness philanthropy' (Palmer et al., 2022). Building on a discourse which began at the turn of Millennium (Giroux, 2005), authors such as Nettleton and Hardy (2006) and Palmer and Dwyer (2019) have noted how the growth of charitable giving and fundraising via sports-based initiatives runs parallel with the retrenchment of the welfare state, and the winding back of government funding for health and social services across most Western, neoliberal countries (Eikenberry and Mirabella, 2018).

In relation to 'sleepout' events, a range of additional criticisms have also been noted. These events are often billed as being about raising awareness, as well as funds, where some participants report that these experiences give them a good insight into street-based sleeping (Day, 2022). However, a single night in a sleeping bag in the artificial environment created for a 'sleepout' event, with food, drink, security, and friendly company all provided, is demonstrably different to the realities of long-term entrenched street-based sleeping. As such, it may provide a false or incomplete understanding of the realities of sleeping on the street (Guardian, 2013a), both normalising and overstating the problem by promoting the notion that homelessness can, and does, happen to anyone (D'Abrera, 2018; 2019). The point has also been made that street-based sleeping is not the most significant aspect of homelessness, given that the numbers of people on the streets are a small fraction of those stuck in poor quality hostels, sofa surfing, or in insecure, temporary accommodation (Guardian, 2013a; 2013b). There have also been accounts of people experiencing homelessness who have been turned away (Inside Croydon, 2019), and in some cases, asked to leave by security guards at some of these events (Westminster World, 2019).

The increasing significance of these sleepout events, and the absence from the literature of any data or critical analysis about them, prompted the current study. The aim of this research was to explore the perceptions of participants and stakeholders of a 'sleepout' event held to raise money for, and awareness of, homelessness charity work.

The 'sleepout' event

An event in March 2023, in the East Midlands, England, UK, was chosen as the location to conduct the research. Permission was granted by the organisation involved in the specific charity fundraising sleepout event. Due to the severe cold weather (-5C), the sleepout event was forced to move venues due to safety for the participants involved (religious building to a charity building). Some participants chose to sleepout at the original location. A severe weather emergency protocol (SWEP) was activated by the local council that evening due to the extreme cold weather, providing emergency accommodation for street-based sleepers. Event registration was on a Friday at 6.30pm where participants were able to bring either their own cardboard boxes or acquire cardboard boxes at the sleepout event. Participants then constructed their cardboard shelters in the car park next to the charity building. At 7pm there was a welcome introduction to participants by the charity CEO and speeches by the local Mayor, High Sheriff, and the Diocese of a local church, including a poetry reading from a service user of the charity with lived experience. The event also hosted some live music by a local singer, including hot food and drinks, and access to indoor toilets. Most participants chose to sleep outside in the car park; however, some participants chose to sleep indoors due to the weather conditions. In the morning, from 5am, a Christian organisation provided a cooked breakfast (sausage/bacon rolls with coffee/tea). The participants left the sleepout event of their own accord.

Research Methods

Through a mixture of purposive and snowballing sampling (theoretical sampling approach), participants and stakeholders were recruited to this study. The data collection timeframe was between Friday 10th March – Monday 17th April 2023. Authors TG and IR conducted face-to-face participant interviews at the sleepout event on Friday 10th March 2023. TG conducted a mixture of face-to-face and online interviews (Microsoft Teams) with all other participants.

Semi-structured qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted with participants. Sets of questions were slightly different for participants (public/staff) on the night of the sleepout event and for other participants (charity, organisations, services, and people experiencing homelessness) (See Appendix 1). For participants who took part in the sleepout event, they were encouraged to record an audio diary throughout the night to talk about how they were feeling or participate in a follow-up interview. Five participants agreed to take part in a follow up interview with the author TG.

The total number of participants was 32 (nine males, 23 female participants). Participant profile was predominantly white, English, all aged 18 and over. Of the 32 participants, two were male and were experiencing homelessness (ages 25 and 30 respectively); 16 were the public, and one was a service user in a housing provider; three were staff from the sleepout event; 10 were from charities/organisations; and one was from the local authority. Six participants reported having engaged in a sponsored charity fundraising sleepout event before (one of these participants had participated in three events before). All individuals were residents of the county in which the event location was held. Other individuals involved in the sleepout event were business owners, CEOs, and local stakeholders. Overall, five people had openly disclosed they were or had experienced some form of homelessness (service user from housing provider, public, one charity/ organisation, two people currently experiencing homelessness).

Interviews ranged from 10 to 50 minutes and were recorded using either a Dictaphone or online (MS Teams). All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Ethical approval was granted.

Data analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2022) thematic analysis framework was used to assess the total data set gathered from individual interviews and audio recordings. This approach is suited to questions relating to people's experiences and to the ways in which people construct meaning from their experiences. Its purpose is to identify patterns of meaning across a data set. We used the six steps advised by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2022), which include: First becoming familiar with the data set, then identifying initial codes, searching for themes in the data, reviewing those themes, and then settling on the final themes before writing up. To ensure the credibility and reliability of coding, transcriptions were independently reviewed and coded by at least two members of the research team, and discrepancies and key themes were discussed with the whole team. To ensure a degree of reflexivity, the researchers discussed pre-existing knowledge, perceptions, and biases in relation to the subject before assessing the data.

Author positionality

The author, TG, has participated in this sponsored charity fundraising sleepout event in 2019. All the authors have worked and continue to work with charities and organisations involved in homelessness and street-based sleeping. All authors have been on an outreach event. None of the authors have experienced prolonged homelessness or entrenched street-based sleeping. These personal experiences have both informed the line of enquiry and influenced the design of the study and the interpretation of findings.

Results

Five key themes were identified from the collected data: 1) Raising awareness; 2) Ambivalence; 3) Hostility; 4) “It’s not really rough sleeping”; and 5) Exclusion and absence of people with lived experience.

Theme one: Raising awareness

The aims of charity sleepout events are generally to raise funds for the hosting organisation or charity, and to raise awareness. Participants in our selected event largely agreed that these aims were met. Members of the general public who took part commented on this aspect:

It makes people aware of what homeless people have to go through. We’re doing it on one night... It makes you think about what they must go through... it really does open people’s eyes. (Participant – Public)

It’s a crazy thing to do. It’s got everybody’s attention. (Participant – Public)

It was clear that some participants not only increased their own understanding of and insight into the issue, but also had conversations with their social and professional networks about their participation in the event, and the reasons for it:

It has certainly raised our awareness in talking to people about our sponsorship. (Participant – Public)

It’s got people’s interests to do these events in the future. Some people have said “I would love to do that”. (Participant – Public)

Some participants used the opportunity to engage in debate and challenge stigma and beliefs about street-based sleeping:

I have been posting on social media. I don’t like the stigma around it [homelessness]... people go “well they’re all on alcohol or drugs” and I say, “they might be... have you thought they might not have a support system... it’s their way of getting away from it”. (Participant – Public)

In alignment with this, organisers were keen that awareness raising was emphasised as much as fundraising:

Raising awareness was the main aim. Obviously, we wanted to raise funds... remove stigma... because that’s ultimately how we will seek change. What also makes a massive difference is the way people treat them. Those perception opens doors, employment, housing. (Participant – Charity)

Additionally, several participants made the point that the experience increased their empathy for individuals who faced the realities of street-based sleeping:

I'm still talking about the event... Empathy is something that if you've experienced just a little bit of what somebody else is experiencing it's stronger... never experiencing it all (Participant – Public – Follow up)

Participants who work in the sector had far more mixed views about the utility and purpose of sleepout events. Some were circumspect and others had a very clear view that these events do not raise awareness or generate real understanding:

I use the word 'Do-gooders' [who say] "it's really important I did my bit". They're not fully aware of what they're doing... they're highlighting it but there's no response. They'll go for one night and go home the next morning. (Participant – Charity)

People look forward to it because it's a social... but you can do that anytime... it's tagged into doing some good as well... it's a social networking opportunity... There's no understanding. They're not there to talk about what they're there for. That's my biggest issue. There is no context behind it. (Participant – Charity)

Others took a pragmatic view, acknowledging that an initiative which raises both funds and awareness, whilst is not true homelessness, is generally a positive one and is valuable:

I've got mixed thoughts... Anything that raises awareness is a bonus. It's an opportunity for funding, let's face it, funding is hard to come by. Anything that puts pennies in the pot has got to be a good thing... The intention is great. (Participant – Local Authority)

Some of those working in the sector were very clear about the positive function that the events have in terms of awareness raising:

People have some quite short-sighted conceptions of homelessness. Sleepouts are about giving people an experience, although not the real thing... of what it's like [to be homeless]... There's a greater level of sympathy and understanding of the challenges... The role of sleepout isn't just about fundraising in and of itself it's an exercise in awareness... You wouldn't understand unless you've experienced it and it's hard to understand even if you've worked with people. (Participant – Staff)

One participant who worked in the sector shared their views of, and impact on, services users:

For most [service users] they're grateful we choose to do this. They understand perceptions are changing... The one thing they want more than anything... more than funds, they want humanity, respect... to be treated like everybody else. Some would say "I got spat onto today" or "I was asked to leave because of my appearance". Sleepout events go towards changing the conversation...

The impact for them is big, they feel excited that there are funds becoming available which are going to be provided for a better service and more resources. (Participant – Charity)

Theme two: Ambivalence

As noted above, many participants agreed that the events do raise awareness, but some also expressed unease about the appropriateness of the events, and whether the awareness which is generated is accurate and/or helpful. Almost all the ambivalence was expressed by individuals working in the sector. Perhaps reflecting their experience and greater insight into the realities of street-based sleeping. Only one member of the public expressed any ambivalence:

It could come across as quite condescending, that people are gonna go and sleep out for the night and think they know what... they're on about. (Participant – Public)

For those who work in the sector ambivalence was much clearer:

I don't think it's an appropriate way of doing things, I think it probably does what they want it to do. (Participant – Charity)

As someone who works with people rough sleeping everyday, I feel very uncomfortable about it. It's patronizing their situation. People who go into it are in full good physical health... You start at 100%. You also have time to prepare, buy thermal clothes, a good sleeping bag. You could manage to get through [one night]. You're safe, there are other people around you... there will be food and toilets provided. It's just a completely unrealistic and sanitised reflection of what it's like on the streets. (Participant – Charity)

They're doing it for a reason. There's everything that comes as being part of an event that isn't there [rough sleeping]... it's almost like a team building event... I really struggle with the fact that it's making it out to be this friendly, warm, safe practice. It's not. It's an event for raising awareness. (Participant – Local Authority)

Some participants reflected on the consequences of the ways in which both individuals and organisations used publicity to raise the profile and fundraising power of the event:

I am not sure what they will think (about the photographs of the event). They would probably look at us and think "oh look they are sleeping inside. I don't get the chance to do that." There's a risk it will be seen as glorifying. You see people on social media giving food to homeless people... but they record themselves giving the food and post on social media. I understand why they're taking photos; people might think that is shoving it in their face. (Participant – Public)

For some, the ambivalence also came with some sense of guilt:

The only issue is you are out here to raise awareness... taking photos of the boxes (shelters), I feel bad. I know we're raising money... there is guilt attached... I am doing this for one night and going back to my house. (Participant – Housing Association)

Reflecting on their ambivalence, one participant had a clear suggestion for an alternative activity:

It's not an appropriate way to raise awareness. There are other events that you can... depict the challenges of someone sleeping rough. Real life case studies... I don't think you should capture an individual that's currently living on the streets. That's their life. You're almost using them as some kind of anti-advertising campaign... you can reflect on people that have been through that process and... are in a better place. (Participant – Charity)

Theme three: Hostility

For some staff working in the sector, there was no ambivalence, and they were very clear that these events are not a good idea. Some expressed clear hostility to the whole concept:

They make me feel uncomfortable. It's using something so inherently dangerous and life threatening, as a vehicle to raise funds. (Participant – Charity)

In the middle of a refugee crisis, do we all go and sit in a dingy in the middle of the English Channel for 36 hours with no food and water? (Participant – Charity)

Similar contentious analogies were made by several interviewees:

It's their fundraiser, they could do something else... you would be as well having a cake sale because trying to recreate something so horrific and not doing it, in a way that is real... just do something else. You don't raise money for... [Cancer Research UK] by sitting in a cancer ward, you don't raise money for a war-torn country by shooting at each other. (Participant – Charity)

In response to a discussion about participants at the sleepout event customising their shelters and having an internal competition, this elicited a visceral reaction from one interviewee: "I think it's distasteful" (Participant – Charity).

Theme four: “It’s not really rough sleeping”

As with the previous theme, negative views were more clearly and forcefully expressed by some of those working in the sector:

It doesn’t send the right message. For someone who doesn’t have a great understanding of rough sleeping, they see this event, and how individuals portray those people sleeping rough and think, it’s not great, but they’ve got boxes they look really warm... In reality individuals aren’t usually sleeping in a nice well-lit environment or conveniently moved... somewhere safer. (Participant – Charity)

If you’d of taken somebody [rough sleeper] to that event it would be shameful, its glamping... It’s supposed to represent a really gritty part of our society nobody wants to talk about. People give a bit of change but don’t look someone in the eye and... have a conversation. I want to do something good, but don’t want to get my hands dirty. This is a really good way of achieving that, in a classic British style, “Let’s keep this above board and not actually tackle any of the hard questions or root causes”. (Participant – Charity)

One participant, who works daily with street-based sleepers, explained why they thought sleepout events did not approximate to street-based sleeping:

I’m embarrassed people think that is what it’s like... It’s not like that when people are rough sleeping. To attempt to recreate that is impossible. (Participant – Charity)

If you’ve ever worked with somebody [rough sleeper] and it was a cold, dark, winters night. You’d done everything you could to get them into accommodation and couldn’t... had to pack that person with a bag of food, a sleeping bag and send them on their way and said “good luck” and then lock the office door and gone home. The feeling of having sent them into danger... I think it is absolutely horrific. I find these events difficult because it doesn’t replicate in any sensible way. (Participant – Charity)

If you talk to a homeless person, they wouldn’t “get a hot chocolate and lay down and go to sleep in a safe environment”. Throughout the night... they walk around to keep warm. If you sleep, you’ll get robbed. (Participant – Housing Association)

Another participant made an important point about understanding the reasons and causes for individuals resorting to sleeping on the street:

It completely avoids all the real issues to do with homelessness... you sleep in a box for a night, when the root of these issues are drugs and mental health issues... That conversation is completely missing. We’re avoiding all the complicated things. Everybody who doesn’t have those issues gets picked up [for housing], but the ones who are on the streets who’ve got real complex needs... that’s what’s missing from the conversation. (Participant – Charity)

The views expressed by those working in the sector contained several assumptions about how service users might react to these events. Generally, these followed the line that the events do not genuinely reflect the realities of homelessness, and that service users would be angry about others pretending to be sleeping on the street for one night whilst having a relatively cossetted experience.

Some interesting evidence emerged, however, about the actual views of people with lived experience of homelessness. That evidence suggests that service users themselves were far less cynical and did not share the views of some staff:

They raise a lot of money and awareness. When service users know we do it they get quite excited. I've had some people who have been worried about us... I was expecting them to think you're really taking the piss. Champagne socialists sort of thing... instead they were giving tips, "are you sure you want to do this? Where are you doing it? Is there anyone watching you? We will walk round and check you're, ok?" (Participant – Public [Probation])

Theme five: Exclusion of individuals with lived experience

Echoing a finding noted earlier from other similar events, some participants were aware that individuals who were experiencing homelessness were sometimes turned away from sleepout events:

The rough sleepers aren't allowed to sleep outside the [venue]. They do get moved on... It's condescending. We all sit here and pretend to be homeless, that's OK. But if you're actually homeless, you're not welcome. (Participant – Charity)

A number of participants also noted this absence:

Wouldn't it have been nice to talk to people and hear about their lived experiences of homelessness and engage with them? (Participant – Charity)

Maybe involve someone who has lived experience in the organisation [sleepout events]. (Participant – Person experiencing homelessness)

Some participants felt that perhaps people who were experiencing homelessness were unaware of these sleepout events:

I don't think the people on the streets even know it's happening. Whether that's intentionally or not, I don't know. (Participant – Housing Association)

I am not sure everyone [rough sleepers] know about these events? (Participant – Person experiencing homelessness)

The sleepout event in question did involve a service user with lived experience of homelessness who shared their experiences through poetry reading:

There was a guy [with lived experience] that wrote poems. That was very moving. It would have been nice... to have met more people [rough sleepers]. (Participant – Public – Follow up)

[Poetry reading] was so powerful. Hearing from people with lived experience could be really helpful. (Participant – Public – Follow up)

The individual in question is currently housed by the charity who organised the event, and no individuals who are currently homeless were at the event.

One staff member with previous lived experience of homelessness offered the following reflection:

For the most part, people are emotionally intelligent enough to get there [in their heads] regardless of how entirely authentic the experience is... That's kind of good enough for me... I think at the very least what it probably does do, for the chap who joined us... he will go away knowing 70 people feel better about helping him and people like him and the challenges they face... It's kind of bridging the gap because the whole homeless experience exists on the margins of society. [Sleepout events] kind of gets rid of that a little bit. It brings people closer together. (Participant – Staff)

Discussion

The aim of this research was to explore the perceptions of participants and stakeholders of a 'sleepout' event held to raise money for, and awareness of, homelessness charity work. It has been useful and instructive to hear the divergent views and perceptions of both participants and non-participants about the nature and value of charity sleepout events.

Members of the public who took part generally had very favourable views with regard to the structure and value of the sleepout event, and felt good about their participation. Farmer et al. (2020) have found that people with liberal views with a commitment to social justice are more likely to take part in a breadth of charitable activities, and to focus on events which are perceived as contributing to a reduction of inequality in society. Members of the public with such values are likely to be those who are drawn to a range of different initiatives to support persons experiencing homelessness. Also, those with liberal views have been found to have greater tendencies to empathy (Morris, 2020). Taking part in an event which allows them to have a sense of empathy for those who are forced to sleep on the street is likely to enhance the feel good factor and sense of doing good for such individuals (regardless of whether the event genuinely replicates street-based sleeping in any way or not, it allows people to feel that it does, and therefore to feel empathy).

D'Aloisio (2007) noted, in relation to fundraising for breast cancer charities, how the language of community and of self-care is invoked and used to persuade participants, particularly women, to raise money for breast cancer research, taking advantage of the empathy which is felt for women who have experienced that illness. She provides a critique of this growing fundraising movement which aligns with critique that we noted in the introduction of what has been called fitness philanthropy. Palmer et al. (2022) concluded that while fitness philanthropy can be conceptualised as a moral community, leveraging social capital to improve the charitable sector and provide space for everyday expressions of kindness and care, we need to be critical in locating such developments as part of the politics and subjectivities of neoliberalism and the rise of what has been called 'caring capitalism'. Essentially this suggests that 'care' is a subordinated, secondary value, where the primary value is to approach all aspects of life with a competitive mindset and financial goals (Barman, 2016). In this view, adults should be competitive to develop resources that enable independence and autonomy. Any dependence is seen as problematic. Such activities are also evident in sponsored sleepout events (Vinnies CEO sleepout, 2023) where social impact through active participation and cause marketing experiences has been explored (Montgomery and Khan, 2018; Montgomery, 2020; Vinnies CEO Sleepout, 2023).

We have found that, in relation to homelessness and street-based sleeping, the public can similarly be persuaded to take part in events which allow them to feel a sense of community and a sense of doing good. There is also critique of this, but it tends to come more from staff working in support agencies and from academics rather than from public participants. Views of those working in the sector, both those who took part in the sleepout event and those who did not, were more mixed and contained much more in the way of ambivalence, or in some of those who were non-participants, outright hostility. The scepticism about the nature and function of these events echoes that which has been articulated by a number of researchers and observers. For example, Parsell and colleagues (Parsell and Watts, 2017; Parsell, 2018; 2019) have systematically critiqued the efficacy of this type of what they call "caring and compassionate" responses to homelessness. Parsell (2019, p.15) argued that homelessness can only be ended through the provision of social and affordable housing, and that these charitable and compassionate responses are distractions that are "neither motivated by nor directed toward solving homelessness." Those authors argue for 'effective altruism' and a focus on evidence-based solutions to homelessness, particularly those based on a 'Housing First' model, which now has a substantial evidence base to support both its effectiveness and cost effectiveness in terms of reducing demand for street-based services and other public services. Parsell and Watts (2017) go further and suggest that some of the charity-based responses are not only ineffective and not evidence

based but may be actively harmful in taking attention and resources away from demonstrably evidence-based solutions, in favour of headline grabbing and emotive interventions which may be more about making the donor feel good than about offering real solutions for the individual experiencing homelessness.

One response to this critique is to note that street-based sleeping and homelessness in all of its forms shows no signs of disappearing and that the required policy changes to make that happen, particularly in terms of making sufficient affordable housing available, are not on anyone's horizon, at least not in the UK in 2023. To continue to campaign for the required policy changes is noble and necessary, but in the meantime, individuals continue to experience real hardship and to need support. We do not believe that initiatives which raise money for charity organisations working in the sector, and which initiate conversations about the underlying issues, are bad in themselves, nor do they undermine policy work directed at achieving housing solutions.

One other point which is relevant to this discussion. The critiques from Parsell and others are about street-based interventions such as soup kitchens and mobile laundries. Our focus in this small study was on a fundraising event. The charity organising the event, which will be the beneficiary of funds raised, does have Housing First policies and housing offers with Housing First support services in the region in which the event took place.

It may be that members of the public are less well informed about the complexities and realities of sleeping on the street and homelessness, and about the most effective solutions. In that sense, it is recommended that there is also a need for a better understanding of these issues and participants in our study also made the same point. As well as awareness raising, in terms of prompting some thought about the plight of the homeless, it would be useful to also provide education which increases understanding of the complexities of homelessness, and of what is 'effective altruism' in the sense of what are the most evidence based and effective solutions.

It is perhaps not surprising that most members of the public who chose to take part had more positive views of the event. As noted earlier, people choose charitable activities which are personally meaningful to them, and to some extent fit with their political ideologies (Farmer et al., 2020). When we are personally invested in something we are more likely to focus on the positive aspects of it. A broader population survey of public attitudes toward such events would be required to establish whether and how much participant views were different to those of the broader public.

For some staff working in the sector, there was no ambivalence, and they were very clear that these events are not a good idea. Some expressed clear hostility to the whole concept, which is reflected in the literature (D'Abrera, 2019). Equally, as hinted at in our study, there may be some assumptions and moral positions taken by some staff and commentators, with regard to sleepout events, which are at odds with not only the more positive framing given by public participants, but also the views of at least some of those with lived experience.

There was concern about the exclusion of those with lived experience from these kinds of events, both in terms of their absence at the planning stage, and their exclusion from the actual event. As noted earlier, some individuals were invited and included, and the views of some others were captured. Green (2022) has written eloquently about the ways in which lived experience needs to be considered for it to be meaningful, and the importance of consultation when planning initiatives, being careful with language, and ensuring that persons with lived experience are comfortable with the nature of their participation.

It would be instructive to canvass more in depth views from those with lived experience about sleepout events, as well as ensuring that they become involved in the planning of events, as well as taking part on the night, should they choose to and feel comfortable doing so.

Limitations

This small study has a number of limitations, which include the following. Firstly, we were able to engage with participants during the event, which provided for spontaneous reflections and direct feedback about their experiences. However, participants had no advance notice and were not able to have time to think about and prepare for a research interview, and therefore no time to offer in depth considered reflections. We also initially aimed to use audio diaries so that individuals could offer thoughts and reflections throughout the whole event, rather than in a snapshot interview. Although we were unable to capture audio diaries, five follow up interviews were conducted which considered in depth reflections and thinking about the event. Nonetheless, to our knowledge this is the first piece of research to explore participant's perspectives on charity fundraising sleepout events in the UK.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The research has shown that public participants in sponsored charity sleepout events are generally very positive about their experiences and genuinely believe that they are doing the twin goods of raising money for housing and homelessness charities, and raising awareness of the issues. Our research contributes to a gap in the literature by exploring the role of and perceptions of sponsored charity fundraising sleepout events through the voices of people taking part in these events, charities, and people experiencing homelessness.

Based on the recommendations provided by the participants in this study, it is evident that organisations responsible for delivering charity fundraising sleepout events could enhance their events by a number of additions to the structure and running of them. For example, in future there could be more and better co-ordinated publicity about the specific events, which would enhance both the fundraising and awareness functions. High-profile mainstream media could be utilised, including local television channels with a greater use of a range of social media platforms. Additionally, there could be increased educational content as part of the event, whether in the form of written resources, talks from staff in the sector and those with lived experience, or use of other multimedia channels to communicate information. More opportunity for conversation and interaction is also needed. Whilst cognisant of the need to remain inclusive, a higher registration fee may increase the fundraising power. Alternatively, other kinds of events might meet the needs without the more controversial aspect of asking people to simulate sleeping on the street for one night. For example, an indoor fundraising event which involves people with lived experiences and organisations and charities in the sector, with talks and educational aspects.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Questionnaires for participants

General public/ staff

- What do you think is the impact of Sleep Easy Events –
 - ... on raising public awareness?
 - ... on organisations supporting people who experience homelessness?
 - ... on people who experience homelessness?
- Any other impacts you think the event has?
- Are there any disadvantages (alongside advantages) of these sleepout events?
- Why did you choose to take part in this event?

Prompt: Give something back, lived experience of homelessness, know someone who has been homeless, other reasons.

- Have you taken part in this event before?
- What prompted you to take part again?
- What do you hope to gain (if anything) from taking part?
- What, if any are you aware of local services which support vulnerable people experiencing homelessness?
- Is there anything else you would like to tell us

Follow-up for general public/ staff

What was your experience of the event? Prompt – How did it make you feel; Did you have an opportunity to speak with other people participating in the event?

Do you think this event provides a ‘snapshot’ of what it is like to be homeless?

Would you take part in this event again? Why?

Would you recommend this experience to family and friends?

Is there anything else you would like to tell us?

Charities/ People experiencing homelessness

- Are you aware of charity fundraising sleepout events (such as the YMCA Lincolnshire 'Sleep Easy' event) which raises awareness of vulnerable people experiencing homelessness?
- What do you think is the impact of these charity fundraising sleepout events...
 - ... on raising public awareness?
 - ... on organisations supporting people who experience homelessness?
 - ... on people who experience homelessness?
- Any other impacts you think the events have?
- Are there any disadvantages (alongside advantages) of these sleepout events?
- Have you taken part in this event before?
- Would you take part in this event?
- Is there anything else you would like to tell us?