

SOUP RUNS IN CENTRAL LONDON:

**‘The right help
in the right place
at the right time?’**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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About LSE Housing

LSE Housing is a research and consultancy group within The Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE). We aim to develop understanding of the dynamics in disadvantaged neighbourhoods; promote models of housing and neighbourhood management; develop ways to support community and resident self help action, especially in social housing areas; and shape government policy. Our research considers the impact of poor neighbourhood and area conditions on residents and the role of local people in regenerating and improving their communities.

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Headlines

- Soup run providers are committed to street soup runs until there is nobody using them. Soup runs aim to help not just the homeless but also vulnerably housed and socially excluded people if they need help.
- Building-based services (BBS) working with homeless people provide invaluable support on a controlled basis, excluding some. Additional or alternative provision for meeting basic needs including food and clothing and providing social contact and support for those on the streets is essential to reach those who are unable or unwilling to access current services.
- A common criticism of soup runs is that they help to sustain a potentially damaging street lifestyle rather than helping homeless people to address their problems and prepare for life away from the streets. People should be encouraged to come indoors and to move away from life on the streets.
- The impact of soup runs can be negative and disruptive on others who share public spaces within crowded cities.
- Free food indoors would help, based in churches that open their doors to the homeless. Volunteers could again provide these services. This underpins social contact and can build on social capital. Some soup run providers travel long distances to Westminster to provide services when needs could be met closer to home.

1. INTRODUCTION

This report aims to provide an independent and objective perspective on soup runs in the London Borough of Westminster. A broad definition of soup run has been used throughout – to include any mobile food distribution service operating primarily to serve the homeless within the borough of Westminster. We wanted to find out whether and how soup runs in Westminster fitted into the commitment of the Government to provide ‘the right help, in the right place at the right time’.

We interviewed 105 soup run and other service users; 10 soup run providers; 25 key actors in the homeless field. We visited 20 soup runs in operation in Westminster and spoke to local residents and businesses affected.

2. DEBATES AROUND SOUP RUNS IN WESTMINSTER

Here we outline the most prominent arguments that surround soup runs.

- Soup runs in Westminster have attracted considerable attention as a form of street provision to rough sleepers. The issue has been contentious for many years now, and there have been various efforts by the local authority to reduce, co-ordinate and replace soup runs with other forms of provision and support
- A common criticism of soup runs is that they help to sustain a potentially damaging street lifestyle rather than helping homeless people to address their problems and prepare for life away from the streets
- However soup runs provide a safety net by making available food and social contact to those who are unable or unwilling to access other services. There are acknowledged gaps and failures in the current support services, particularly for people from the EU accession states (A2 and A8) and asylum seekers who have no recourse to public funds, and for some of the most marginal rough sleepers
- Some soup runs come into the borough from outside Central London, and sometimes from outside London altogether, with little understanding of the building based facilities for the homeless already provided. Soup runs are inadequately coordinated and under-regulated around health and safety and food hygiene
- Soup runs attract some people who are not homeless. Many who use soup runs are not rough sleeping. Soup runs have an open-access, ‘no questions asked’ approach, seeing their role as being there to help whoever is in search of either nutritional or social support and therefore providing for lonely and isolated vulnerably housed people, the elderly, the poor as well as the currently homeless.
- The open-ended welcome soup runs offer allows people to remain anonymous and to give as much or as little personal information as they wish. Soup run providers do not make judgements on the ‘deservedness’ of recipients.

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- Westminster City Council and other critics of soup runs argue that some of the most entrenched and vulnerable rough sleepers do not use soup runs. This group represents a small minority of rough sleepers who are very hard to reach and for whom service providers have struggled to find suitable solutions
- Mainstream, statutorily funded services working with the homeless are more restricted. Many day centres have moved away from offering only basic services for the homeless such as showers and food, and instead have become outcome focused and professionalised with an aim of moving people on
- The negative impact of soup runs on the local street environment and area where they happen is significant and raises many objections from local residents
- There are also suggestions that soup runs help to prevent crime and anti-social behaviour by providing resources to vulnerable people who may otherwise take unlawful action to survive
- A significant aspect of the soup run debate is the question of why there are such concentrations of vulnerable people in Westminster. Some argue that soup runs attract vulnerable people into central areas whilst others suggest that soup runs come to the areas where homeless and needy people are already concentrated.

3. METHOD AND APPROACH

We interviewed four main groups of stakeholders:

- soup run and Building Based Services (BBS) users;
- soup run providers;
- soup run 'neighbours' – local residents and businesses;
- key policy and practice actors in the wider homelessness field.

We collected:

- basic information on soup runs ie, who uses them, why, where, in what numbers;
- how important are soup runs to people, what would happen without them;
- views on other services available in Westminster;
- basic demographic information and housing status of service users.

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We also observed soup runs in the key central sites of Victoria, Temple and the Strand. These sites were chosen by the Soup Run Steering Group as the main sites within Westminster for soup run activity. Lincoln's Inn Fields, was not included, despite the high volume of soup runs there because of its location within Camden as well as Westminster.

Further observation occurred at day centres, during outreach visits with BBS workers and at meetings with different actors. We spoke to voluntary and statutory organisations including Crisis, Homeless Link, Housing Justice, St Mungo's, Look Ahead, Thames Reach, Broadway, Salvation Army, hostels such as King George's (English Churches Housing Group) and Castle Lane (Look Ahead), West London Churches Homeless Concern, Westminster City Council – policy and service provider role (BBS day centres including the Passage and The Connections at St Martin-in-the-Fields and outreach workers), Police – Safer Streets Homeless Unit (SSMU), Communities and Local Government.

Some interviews were also carried out on our behalf by approved volunteers from BARKA, Broadway and from the LSE.

4. MAIN FINDINGS

Soup run providers' views:

- They are providing a service that is needed
- No clear alternative seems to be available for many of the users
- Soup run providers are committed to street soup runs until there is nobody using them
- Soup runs also provide social contact in a non-professional context
- Soup runs aim to help not just the homeless but also vulnerably housed and socially excluded people if they need help
- Soup run providers offer social contact and direct personal involvement with homeless and vulnerable people beyond simply providing food on the streets
- There is a clear and consistent religious motivation for the provision of food.

Soup run users' views:

- 105 soup run and other homelessness service users within Westminster participated
- Not only rough sleepers used them but few people had problems with this
- The safety net and familiarity that soup runs provide regularly attracted back those who had 'moved on' from the streets into accommodation. Soup runs enable housed people to maintain social contact with friends on the street
- Some identified all soup run users as part of a wider homeless 'community'

- Some felt that those who were not rough sleepers should not use the soup run services
- Some criticised soup runs for supporting drug and alcohol addictions
- Others felt that the system was open to abuse by those trying to make or save some money
- But welcomed the non-judgemental, no restrictions approach of soup runs
- Some 'indigenous' service users resented the recent increase in 'foreigners' using soup runs, this was particularly targeted at soup run users from the most recent EU accession states (A8 and A2).

The reasons for using soup runs vary for each individual and include:

- Basic needs such as food, drink and clothing
- Cash poverty
- The need for social contact and conviviality
- The routine of attending soup runs to provide continuity in social contact
- Support and social contact out of hours – when other services are closed.

Of the 105 respondents:

- 72 people used soup runs regularly or every day
- 15 people used soup runs occasionally
- 18 homeless service users did not use soup runs at all.

The main problems associated with soup runs participants identified were:

- people abusing the system – taking more food/clothing than they needed
- people not queuing – pushing in to get to the van
- arguments between users – generally attributed to drink
- soup runs arriving late or not turning up.

Soup runs were very important according to the majority of respondents; homeless people and wider society would suffer if they were stopped.

Possible alternatives to soup runs were suggested:

- Moving soup runs off the streets to indoor facilities
- Extending day centre opening hours
- Providing places for people to go during the day and in evenings
- More support for people once they have been housed.

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Soup run neighbours views

In Victoria particularly, some local residents experience negative impacts from soup runs. Some of the specific concerns included:

- Anti-social behaviour
- Intimidation and fear – creation of 'no-go' areas
- Creation of litter and mess.

Residents suggested ways of improving the situation:

- Moving soup runs away from residential areas
- Finding alternatives to soup runs.

Some residents accept the important role soup runs currently play for vulnerable people, but question the way people in need are helped and its impact upon local people and the local area. Other residents argue that street provision is not an acceptable way of helping people.

Other key policy and practice actors' views

- Some policy actors criticise soup runs as outdated and damaging for rough sleepers and other vulnerable people. There are better ways of helping people
- Some direct service providers and policy makers acknowledge the important role that soup runs play in accessing vulnerable people
- Policy makers and practitioners agree that there remain too many soup runs in Westminster and too little coordination amongst them
- The lack of formal supervision and regulation of soup run providers is contentious
- Westminster City Council and others have a responsibility to respond to the views of local residents and businesses
- More enforcement is needed to deal with illegal migrants who have no entitlement to public funds. More work is also needed across government to raise awareness among legal migrants of the options and the help available to them.

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5. OVERVIEW

- Soup runs raise complex social and moral questions and challenges around how to provide 'appropriate' help and ensure the most needy are able to access help
- The impact of soup runs can be negative and disruptive for others who share public spaces within crowded cities
- Additional or alternative provision for meeting basic needs including food and clothing and providing social contact and support for those on the streets is essential to reach those who are unable or unwilling to access current services
- Building-based services provide invaluable support on a controlled basis, excluding some
- Those who have been homeless and are struggling in new accommodation with limited social contact need more support
- Those who are housed yet poor, vulnerable and isolated often seek companionship on the street.

Views on the most appropriate way of providing help are divergent. Central and local government policy makers and statutory-funded services focus on support to move people away from the streets. They suggest that unrestricted support offered by soup runs and other voluntary bodies can have a detrimental impact on service users. The focus on partnership working and engaging all stakeholders, including voluntary organisations supports the aim of ending rough sleeping.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

Our proposals for ways forward in dealing with soup runs in Westminster involve closer partnership working and communication between the organisations and stakeholders involved.

- The Soup Run Forum plays an active role in bringing together most soup runs operating in Westminster. There is a need for more coordination to reduce duplication and overprovision further. The Forum can also provide guidelines and minimum standards, encouraging all members to sign up to these codes of practice
- Soup run providers need to work together and with other agencies including BBS outreach workers and the Police SSHU. The Forum provides a potential arena for closer working between soup run providers and other relevant professionals
- Soup run volunteers need clear briefing on signposting service users to services and agencies that could help them
- Outreach workers need to build relationships with soup run providers to help them engage with service users at soup runs and link them into other services
- A working group to discuss and mediate the problems of emergency provision on the streets could help reduce current tensions. This is most pressing in Victoria where the current location of soup runs causes stress to the local resident population

'Motivated volunteers could be trained to offer citizen to citizen engagement to help advise, support, mentor, and befriend homeless and vulnerable citizens.'

- The Simon Community Street Café offers a positive model which could be reproduced. Churches and other community organisations within Westminster and providers should investigate the potential for other street cafes
- More personal individually targeted solutions for those who have not been helped through existing policies and strategies are needed. Communities and Local Government are looking to develop new approaches and can use the wealth of experience within voluntary organisations to help deliver new approaches
- Rapid responses for those newly arrived on the streets to prevent institutionalisation of a street lifestyle
- Address Westminster's role as recipient of people discharged onto the streets from other parts of London and the country as a whole
- There should be urgent support and enforcement policies and action to deal with the complex problems of foreign migrants, with no recourse to public funds
- Motivated volunteers could be trained to offer citizen to citizen engagement to help advise, support, mentor, and befriend homeless and vulnerable citizens
- Increased day centre provision, with free food and social contact, particularly during evenings and at weekends could use volunteers, as is the case with ASLAN at the Webber Street Day Centre on a Saturday morning. Donated food currently given to soup runs could also be used. Based in churches in local boroughs as well as within Westminster
- Free food indoors would help, based in churches that open their doors to the homeless. Volunteers could again provide these services. This underpins social contact – build on social capital
- Dispersal of current provision from Central London. Some soup run providers travel long distances to Westminster to provide services when there may be needs they could meet closer to home
- Increasing support for those who were once homeless but now housed should offer 'soft' support through social contact and befriending as well as the more structured support needed for 'independent' living
- Improve services for isolated individuals and households of all types – wider than homelessness.

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Crisis



City of Westminster

