

As the head of a homeless charity in London I am seeing more and more people driven into poverty



As the head of a homeless charity in London I am seeing more and more people driven into poverty. Government policies are putting the very fabric of our society at risk, argues Cathy

Joseph Mitchell is sleeping rough. He had been made redundant from his job which came with accommodation and his life spiralled downwards very quickly. The fact that he had lost not only his livelihood but also his home in one go meant that he simply hadn't had the chance to think about applying for jobs before he was sleeping on the streets. Yet as with everyone who comes through our doors, and working with the centre's employment and housing advice teams he is determined to use everything he has – and we can offer – to get back into work and to get a roof over his head.

Joseph's story is just one of many we heard over Christmas at the Cardinal Hume Centre, which was founded in 1986 by the Cardinal in response to what he witnessed every day: homeless people bedding down for the night outside Westminster Cathedral and families spending yet another night in bed and breakfast accommodation, utterly unsuitable for their children's health and well-being. Much hard work has taken place since then and progress has been made in tackling, if not eradicating homelessness. Yet if Cardinal Hume were still alive today, I suggest he would be shocked and saddened to see a return to the same conditions.

Over the years, the centre has developed a wide range of on-site services on the premise that, as each human being is different and their needs are complex, so the response to need should be both to the uniqueness and the complexity. In addition to providing accommodation for homeless 16- to 21-year-olds, we concentrate on helping others, both families and individuals, to prevent them becoming homeless. Our services range from housing advice to employment support, from education and skills to family services. We do not provide solutions for people, but work with each person to find their own route forward.

There is an increasing amount of myth and misinformation around about the benefits system, its purpose and its usage, with stigmatisation and stereotyping accompanying it and a serious lack of real debate based on the facts. For example, more than two thirds of the people on benefits in our country are in work. They are not scroungers or skivers. Many of the people who come to the centre are working and have a home – at least for now. But the rising costs of food, clothes, rent and heating mean they are simply not earning enough to make ends meet, however hard they try. Many are also being offered “zero hours” contract which means they never know when they will get work – or rather, get paid – and cannot look for other work in the meantime.

Every day at the centre we see more and more people who are being pushed over the edge into poverty and then homelessness. Why? Because of the cumulative impact of cuts in services, welfare reform and the lack of a national agreement to a Living Wage. In London, of course, the situation is exacerbated by the dearth of affordable accommodation. Cuts to housing benefit were supposed to reduce rents. This is clearly not happening and there is evidence that some landlords are beginning to refuse to take tenants in receipt of housing benefit. The welfare system was established to provide a safety net for those in our society who are vulnerable for whatever reason. Increasingly, we witness the results of that safety net being removed. Alongside are the cuts in legal aid so that, although people have rights under the law, the wherewithal to appeal when those rights are eroded is not there. And just last weekend it was announced that the emergency fund for low income families is to be scrapped by the Government.

The ultimate irony is that none of this makes economic sense. Prevention is always less expensive than cure. More people being homeless will be a drain on the economy. A generation of children and young people living in poverty, including poverty of opportunity and of aspiration, will not contribute to a sounder economic future for this country. We are not only wiping out many of the gains made since the 1980s, we are also putting the very fabric of our society at risk.

What would make a difference? The root cause of the increase in homelessness today is poverty and we must name and acknowledge that if we are to make any progress at all. On the macro level, we need major continuous investment in building more affordable homes. We need to tackle the issue of more than a million empty homes in Britain. We need a firm commitment to introducing and policing a Living Wage, and we need the political courage and will to introduce a fair rent system. On the more local level, we need to ensure that there are more places like the Cardinal Hume Centre which offer the open, non-judgmental welcome and holistic support that our founder insisted upon.

There is a school of thought that says we should not pick up the pieces for the state.

I agree. But we must recognise there is a tangible and vital complementarity in the roles played by both the state and the voluntary sector. One without the other simply does not work in the best interests of everyone.

And perhaps of greatest importance, while responding to the need itself it is crucial that we add our voice – and that of the people we work with – to asking why there is need and why it is increasing so rapidly. As a faith-based organisation especially, we have to continue to ask: why?

As Bishop John Arnold said at the recent parliamentary reception for the Caritas Social Action Network, of which the Centre is a member: “We should judge the success of our society and our civilised living on measuring how we help those most in need, the most vulnerable in our society. Poverty is a challenge to the whole sense of justice, to the very fabric of our society ... and among our tasks as witnesses to the love of Christ is that of giving a voice to the cry of the poor.”

It is Poverty and Homelessness Week from January 25 to February 2. This is organised by a coalition of churches and Church agencies to raise awareness of the forces at play behind poverty and homelessness (visit Housingjustice.org.uk).

I would encourage everyone to join in.

Cathy Corcoran OBE is chief executive of the Cardinal Hume Centre, which helps people gain the skills they need to overcome poverty and homelessness. For more information, visit Cardinalhumecentre.org.uk

Cathy Corcoran - Catholic Herald