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Perceptions of participants and stakeholders of a 'sleepout' event held to raise money for, and awareness, of homelessness charity work

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Context

- The exact known origins of 'sleepout' events are unknown
- UK examples in the early 1990s
- Have become increasingly popular since the Millennium across the global north
- Positionality – TG participated in a 'sleepout' event in March 2019
- Interested in understanding more about 'sleepout' events. Idea was shelved due to COVID-19 pandemic.
- Whilst context of homelessness has changed considerably, template of 'sleepout' events hasn't changed.



Photos courtesy of Thomas George



Methods

- We believe this is the first study to explore the perceptions of participants regarding 'sleepout' events, including stakeholders from housing and homelessness services, and people with lived experience of sleeping rough
- Conducted research on 10th March 2023 in East Midlands, UK.
- Semi-structured qualitative in-depth interviews. Follow-up interviews with public post-event.
- 32 participants (9 males/ 23 females)
- Participants included public, staff from the sleepout event, charities/ organisations, local authority, and people experiencing homelessness.
- Interviews ranged from 10 to 50 minutes and were transcribed verbatim.
- Thematically analysed (Braun and Clarke, 2006).
- Ethical approval was granted by the University of Lincoln Ethics Committee (LEAS UoL2023_13477).



Results

Five themes were identified:

1. Raising awareness
2. Ambivalence
3. Hostility
4. “It’s not really rough sleeping”
5. Exclusion and absence of people with lived experience



Theme One: Raising Awareness

It makes people aware of what homeless people have to go through. We're doing it on one night ... We've got the advantage of hot drinks, food, we can go inside, but homeless people haven't. It makes you think about what they must go through ... it really does open people's eyes. (Participant – Public)

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

For most (service users) they're grateful that this is what we choose to do. They understand that perceptions are changing ... Sleepout events go towards changing the conversation and I know they appreciate that massively. The impact for them is big, it's positive (Participant – Charity)

Raising awareness was the main aim. Obviously, we wanted to raise funds. We wanted to ... try and remove stigma and perception because that's ultimately how we will seek change for our clients. Yes, money does make a difference to our clients, but what also makes a massive difference is the way people treat them and that perception opens doors, employment, housing. (Participant – Charity)



Theme Two: Ambivalence

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

As someone who works with people rough sleeping everyday, I feel very uncomfortable about it. I think it's patronizing. It's just a completely unrealistic and sanitised reflection of what it's like on the streets. (Participant – Charity).

My personal feelings are that it could come across as quite condescending. That these people are gonna go and sleep out for the night and think they know what on earth they're on about. (Participant – Public)

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)

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



Theme Three: Hostility

*I think it's distasteful.
(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)

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

I just think it's their fundraiser for them, but 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)



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

It doesn't send the right message. If someone who doesn't have a great understanding of rough sleeping, see this event ... you might think, it's not great ... In reality individuals aren't sleeping in a nice well-lit environment. (Participant – Charity)

It's patronising. I am embarrassed that people think that is what it's like ... When people are rough sleeping, they're in crisis. To attempt to recreate that is impossible. (Participant – Charity)

It just seems like ... glamping. It's all done in a very British let's do this thing. It's supposed to represent a really gritty part of our society nobody wants to talk about ... I want to do something good, but I don't want to get my hands dirty. It is a really good way of achieving that ... Let's keep this above board and not actually tackle any of the hard questions or root causes. (Participant – Charity)

If you've ever had to work with somebody and it was dark, winter and you had done everything you could to get them into some accommodation that night and couldn't. If you've ever had to pack that person up with a bag of food and a sleeping bag and sent them on their way and said “good luck” and then lock the office door and gone home. The feeling of knowing that you have sent them into danger ... I think it is absolutely horrific (Participant – Charity)



Theme Five: Exclusion and absence of people with lived experience

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

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

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

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

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



Conclusion

- Findings show that whilst the public who participated at the 'sleepout' event are generally very positive, in doing the twin goods of raising money for housing and homelessness charities, and raising awareness of the issue; professionals who work in the homeless sector were more ambivalent and critical.
- Recommendations about enhancing the events structure:
 - More educational content at the event (written resources, talks from professionals from the sector/ people with lived experience)
 - More opportunity for conversation and interaction
 - More and better coordinated publicity
 - An increased registration fee to aid fundraising



What's next?

- Publication (In press)
- Knowledge exchange event with all UK Charities who deliver 'sleepout' events
- Share findings with local housing charity and discuss implementation of recommendations within practice
- Work with a local night shelter (UK charity) who deliver 'sleepout' events and further explore perceptions of these events, using different methodologies (audio diaries, video blogs)



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