

Homeless: Derek Donald

Offering advice to people who have a permanent address and a roof over their head can be difficult, but trying to advise someone who is completely homeless is always a challenge. Take for example Derek. This middle aged guy certainly looked the part as he slumped down in front of me in an interview room. It was a freezing cold February day and I imagine he was happy just to be sitting somewhere warm.

"Can you tell me how to get somewhere to live?" replied Derek "I've had enough of sleeping rough; it's going to kill me. I saw myself in a shop window yesterday, and I just couldn't recognize myself.' I asked him to tell me his story and he did. His decline has been quick and now I felt he had hit rock bottom. He's been in touch with a whole range of organizations on the way down as his drinking led to loss of job, loss of home and loss of personal relationships. Maybe each of these encounters was "half hearted" on his part – but they certainly didn't act as anything like the safety net the most people think exists. *Despite all that has happened, I detected a steely resolve in Derek. From who knows where, he's summonsed up the determination to fix things – to get a job again, to get the booze under control and to get somewhere to live. Maybe its all bluster, maybe he's had a swift one before seeing me – that fruity aroma of a liquid breakfast is unmistakable? Let's see what I can do to help I thought to myself.*

*Where to start? Housing would be a good place. We all know there is a crisis in public housing. More "households", more single people, the credit crunch, limited house building – mean that "waiting lists" for council or other "social housing" are all at record length. In fact, many local councils now allocate housing through a telephone or online "bidding system". As I explain this to Derek, I could see him growing impatient. Of course, Derek is homeless. Not "sofa surfing", not overcrowded, not living out of the back of a Vauxhall Vectra but actually **no where to live homeless**. And its February and he's drinking heavily!*

"When you are homeless, the local council have to check if they have a legal duty to find you somewhere to live, so the council should be the first place to go for help, have you been there yet?" I asked dutifully. 'Hah, that lot?' he said 'A couple of the lads down the hostel have tried there. The woman said they wouldn't qualify for help so she wouldn't let them see anyone. Fat lot og good they were!'

To be honest I wasn't surprised. The local council have had the duty to act as the safety net since the 1970's, but people often end up out of the door in no time with just a list of local landlords. No investigation, no written decision – actually when we call them to find out, no record that he even visited. So, like we've done hundreds of times before we write a carefully worded assertion of their duties to him under the relevant legislation, and a thinly veiled threat that should they not confirm what their duties are to him and why (as required by section 184 of the Housing Act 1996 no less) we have the legal resources to take further action. If we weren't independent from the government, this sort of threat would mean nothing. We fax the letter off and he's off down the road with a copy – couldn't get through to them to sort out an interview – I can't help feeling he looks like he's off to school with a note from his mum. That's what hard times do to a strong willed, and probably fearsome ex prison officer.

I wish him well and I'm encouraged by one thing, he did admit to me that he is an alcoholic. That's the first step in sorting out his life, he's going nowhere until he recognizes that basic fact. I hope he can last the course as it will be a real battle to get his life back together.. Chances are we'll see him at the end of the day just before we close, having made little or no progress. It's a good job I've checked the local hostel has a bed for him tonight.