

A photograph of a person hunched over on a park bench in an urban setting. The person is wearing a dark jacket and light-colored pants. In the background, a train is blurred, moving horizontally across the frame. A yellow sign with the text "PED XING" is visible on the left. The overall scene conveys a sense of homelessness and social isolation.

Ryder

Building a better future for the homeless
How social partnerships in the construction industry
can combat the current crisis

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Homelessness

In 2014, news of ‘anti-homeless spikes’ outside a luxury London apartment block hit the headlines.¹ It was followed by a public outcry against the perceived hostility of the spikes in making the sheltered space unusable for homeless people to take refuge in. Unfortunately, the proliferation of spikes is just the tip of a much larger iceberg concerning the most disadvantaged individuals in our society and a built environment that is increasingly being designed to exclude them.

While we have seen an increase in the delivery of high quality office space and residential schemes, the same cannot be said for affordable housing and developments focused on social care.

The problem of taking an approach that ‘designs out’ homelessness and poverty is that this only serves to pass the problem on elsewhere.²

The Government has committed to eliminating rough sleeping by 2027. This research article looks at how organisations within the construction industry can join and form social partnerships, to help reduce the levels of homelessness on our streets.

Identifying the issue

Acknowledging the issue, construction sector leaders such as RICS are now leading the way in taking responsibility for the industry's role in preventing homelessness. Their 2018 Pledge150 campaign, in partnership with LandAid, pushed to raise awareness of the issue and create 150 bed spaces for homeless people across the UK. During a campaign in 2016 Michael Newey, former RICS President, called for "property professionals to see themselves as part of the solution to ending rising homelessness and delivering more affordable homes".³

Property professionals can be integral in putting an end to rising homelessness.

Exacerbating homelessness, and impeding a viable, scalable solution, is the lack of housing available for people on the lowest incomes. As is widely known, the UK property market is becoming increasingly dysfunctional. As of October 2018, in London alone over 20,000 commercial properties were shown to have been vacant for at least six months,⁴ while demand for affordable, social and temporary housing continues to grow. This demonstrates that the space and resources are available, but the funding, willingness and leadership required to effectively tackle such social issues are not. It is an unfortunate truth that social value and indeed a social conscience are not always as prominent as they should be in our sector. A beacon of hope in such a bleak time is the opportunity this problem gives our industry, to become part of the solution as Newey hoped, through the unique set of skills we possess as an industry.



“We need industry professionals to lend their expertise and tell us about any other such innovative ideas they have, that we, as a united property industry, can tap into and deliver to put an end to rising homelessness.”

Michael Newey, former RICS President⁵

While donations and fundraising are excellent ways to support homeless charities in their great work, direct use of our design and construction skills could prove to be even more valuable. Donating our time and skills to non-profit organisations eliminates the middlemen, reduces project costs and ensures charities are supported throughout design and construction for the best possible outcome. Our money can make a difference, but our expertise is worth threefold. Alongside RICS, there are several charities showing that through communal effort, social change can be achieved by spreading the financial load across the industry. Their success so far provides an opportunity for larger scale change within the construction sector, through stronger partnerships between organisations.

Taking inspiration

Traditionally, the creation of social and affordable housing has been through Local Housing Authorities and increasingly Housing Associations. These organisations provide homes for low income individuals however they are currently not managing to meet increasingly high demand.

This disparity between production and demand is a problem, with the most likely outcome being the increase in the number of people sleeping rough. In reality, rough sleeping accounts for a very small percentage of overall homeless figures in the UK, with 'sofa surfing' and living in temporary or unsuitable accommodation being much more prevalent.

A recent assessment by homeless charity Shelter concluded that at the end of 2018 there were at least 320,000 people classed as homeless in the UK, equating to one in 200 people.⁶ Government statistics also revealed that rough sleeping figures last year reached 4,677, a 165 percent increase since 2010.⁷ These concerning statistics, however, pose an opportunity for the construction industry to pave the way in influencing the lowest rungs of the property ladder to help the most in need.



In an increasingly digital age, the power of the collective has been demonstrated innumerable times – large numbers of people making small personal sacrifices to achieve things one individual simply could not achieve alone. This ‘crowdfunding’ methodology can be applied to the construction industry on a much larger scale regarding both financial and physical help, in the form of a social partnership.

A social partnership can be defined as a form of collaborative action in which organisations across sectors work together to achieve common social goals, that are too large or complex for one organisation alone to tackle.⁸

First trialled in the USA and now being implemented in Australia is a social partnership to combat Victoria’s growing issues with housing for the homeless and low income families.

An eye-opening case study authored by Sharon McDonald discusses the successful implementation of the partnership between two housing associations, a building developer and the State Government of Victoria in a collaboration known as Common Ground.

A key driver in the success of this model is the nature of the skill sets from each organisation being brought together, towards a definitive shared goal of reducing homelessness.

“Successful social partnership models act as catalysts in soliciting further support and generating positive change.”⁹

Just two years after its inception, Common Ground has succeeded in completing a purpose built eight storey building providing accommodation in the form of 131 studio apartments for vulnerable people struggling to retain housing, and 30 apartments for low income families. It is a fair assessment that this project would not have been feasible for one of the organisations alone, and it was a result of pooled resources, knowledge and funding that allowed such a significant achievement.





Already within our industry there are charities doing outstanding work to combat homelessness and improper housing – CRASH and LandAid amongst others. CRASH supports the single homeless as they have no statutory right to housing, whilst LandAid focuses on youth homeless who do have a right to housing.

Working throughout the UK they rely on pooled resources from architectural practices, contractors and suppliers to undertake a range of refurbishment and new build projects aimed at helping people out of homelessness.

Taken in isolation, their fundraising totals and project figures are outstanding, however when held against the figures of remaining homeless people within the UK the extent and rapid growth of the issue is clear. Putting this into numbers:

LandAid, the largest of the aforementioned charities, is currently working towards creating 450 bed spaces between 2017 and 2020.¹⁰

LandAid's current work is mostly maintained by annual donations from supporting partner companies, with funds then being put into projects.

Contextualising LandAid alongside Common Ground, the scale of success achieved through the more formal set up of a social partnership, between fewer contributors, is notable. Between four large partners, 160 beds were created in two years. This evidence raises the question of what could be achieved if LandAid's 70 largest contributors formed smaller partnerships to build specific projects, focusing on contributions of service in favour of money alone. If Common Ground is anything to judge the social partnership model by, the results have the potential to change the face of British homelessness.

Moving towards a solution

A proposal to increase the efficacy and recognition of these organisations would be forming a type of charitable merger, social partnerships between a mixture of charities, official bodies (such as the ARB, CIOB, RICS etc) architectural practices, contractors and housing associations. A joining of forces in this way could improve the spread of projects throughout the UK, streamline administration and most importantly gain more publicity and support from the wider industry. Such partnerships have the potential to transform the construction industry's influence on homelessness from a few separate charities to a nationwide network.

A fair argument some might have against entering into a social partnership is that they already donate to charitable causes and such a partnership is unnecessary. However, it should be noted how intertwined this issue is with our field of expertise.

A conscious shift needs to be taken away from purely considering putting money into a bucket as charity work, when our time and skills within a social partnership could be worth ten times more than our money alone.

As former RICS President Newey suggested, everything from seeking out suitable sites for affordable housing schemes, helping housing associations secure planning, offering design services and products to homeless build schemes is valuable work.

In an industry where often reputation is everything, a company which endorses and reinvests in the local community, while helping vulnerable people off our streets, will hold greater currency in winning work.

“Real charity is about companies and individuals sharing what they are best at to help those less fortunate.”

Francesca Roberts, Chief Executive of CRASH¹¹



Summary

To summarise, a definite social conscience is undeniably emerging within the construction industry, gaining momentum particularly within the last decade.

Charities such as CRASH and LandAid have transformed the lives of thousands of people since their creation, and one can only hope that connecting these charitable organisations with industry figures in solidified, well known social partnerships will attract more funding, more projects and ultimately improve more lives.

While the inception of a nationwide charitable merger with countrywide partnerships is perhaps an ambitious goal for the immediate future, the formation of local social partnerships is entirely possible and necessary. Reach out to LandAid, CRASH or other construction industry charities and offer your support, committing time to developing ideas and schemes that will make significant changes. When it comes to ending homelessness there should be no competition between companies, only solidarity in working together to achieve a common goal.

We would love to hear from you if you are interested in collaborating.



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