Caring for victims of social injustice

By Emma Clancy

ACCORDING to the Mental Health Foundation, one in four people will experience some kind of mental health problem in the course of a year.

Mixed anxiety and depression is the most common mental disorder in Britain and women are more likely to need treatment for a mental health problem than men.

Worryingly, about 10 per cent of children have a mental health problem at any one time and the UK has one of the highest rates of self-harm in Europe, at 400 per 100,000 of the population.

The causes and symptoms of mental health problems are wide and varied and include post-natal depression, drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence sufferers or witnesses and the trauma associated with abortion. Sometimes, there is no reason at all.

According to Keith Fernett, director of the homeless charity Anchor House, many homeless people can suffer from mental health problems. While being homeless in itself does not necessarily cause mental health problems, it will certainly exacerbate any previous conditions.

"Some types of mental health problems can cause people to forget to do the things we take for granted," Mr Fernett said.

"Getting up in the morning, remembering to take medication and even getting to work can be difficult."

Anchor House is on the front line of dealing with homeless people, many of whom have mental health issues or histories of substance abuse, criminal behaviour, physical ill health or long periods of worklessness – in some cases up to 20 years.

Strategy

A former director of local authorities and one-time management consultant with central government, Mr Fernett is used to examining strategic issues. Now, as the director of Anchor House, he directs his energies into improving the position of the homeless.

"The reality is stark and the impact on their lives of dealing with the system is very problematic," he said.

"In Newham we suffer from the postcode lottery. The borough receives £12m each year for all its people support services. In Camden it is around £32million for an area with a smaller population and arguably less deprivation.

"We have governmental spending that is procured through large scale projects on a regional basis, very little of which reaches our residents. Some of it is sub-contracted on a considerable scale, and pays for the overheads of a multitude of training firms and consultancies," he said.

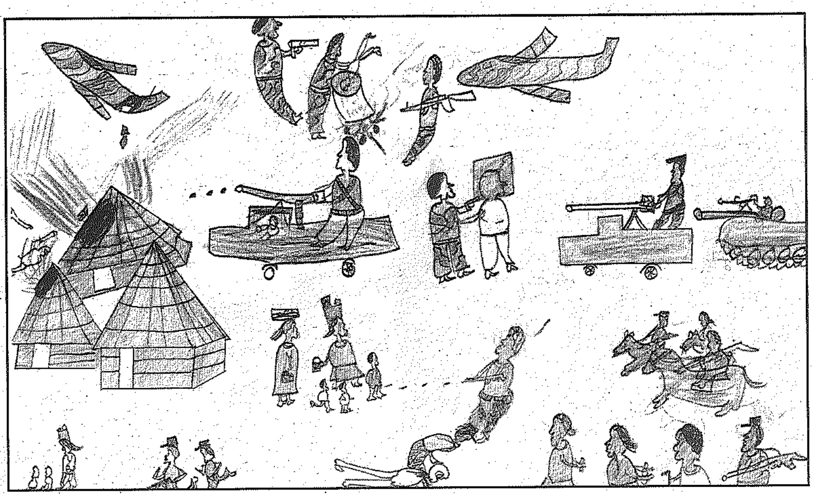
Mr Fernett argues that services at Anchor House serve the community by making sure the homeless people with mental health problems integrate back into the community rather than taking up expensive places in hospitals and prisons, where the price to the taxpayer is considerably higher. Despite this, getting grants and loans for these people is often impossible.

"Imagine having been out of work for four years. You volunteer at Anchor House as a way of getting used to work again and to gain experience. Then the job centre stops your benefits. Why? Because they maintain the individual is not available for work.

"We are getting them ready for work but the job centre is prepared to leave them destitute. Anchor House then receives no rental income."

In the last 12 months, Mr Fernett has had to deal with a number of funding losses yet the work at Anchor House continues.

These people on the margins of our society need practical help as well as prayers to enable them to live the life they deserve.



Shocking: This picture was drawn by a child from Chad and depicts real events

■ Another organisation trying to cater for the mental health needs of people is Waging Peace.

In 2003, the world was shocked by the images on television depicting the genocide in Darfur. Some five years on and the atrocities are still occurring – it just seems the world's media has forgotten the plights of these people.

If women leave their camps to collect wood they are often kidnapped and gang raped. Children have been shot for entertainment or have witnessed someone close to them being brutally murdered in front of them. Even aid workers are not safe in Darfur and many agencies no longer speak out about Sudan for fear of their representatives being targeted or thrown out.

Many children under the age of ten have known nothing but war and fear. The forgotten people of Darfur have no one to stand up for them.

However, Waging Peace has embarked on a picture exchange programme. Children in Darfur draw pictures of their family, where they live etc, and Waging Peace swaps them with similar drawings from British children.

In June and July last year, Waging Peace researcher Anna Schmitt conducted a three week fact-finding mission to Eastern Chad.

Witness

While collecting testimonies from adults, women told Anna how their children had witnessed horrendous events when their villages were being attacked. She gave the children aged six to 18 paper and pencils and asked them what their dreams were for the future and what their strongest memory was.

When the children handed Anna their drawings, she was shocked to see the details of their memories of the attacks. While a handful of children had submitted drawings of daily life in the village or in the refugee camp, the majority of the drawings described the attacks on their village by Sudanese government forces and their allied Janjaweed militia.

Many of the drawings depict men being killed, women being shot, beaten or taken prisoner; babies being thrown on fires and helicopters and planes bombing civilians.

The 500 drawings collected by Waging Peace amount to a form of criminal evidence from silent witnesses. The killing, bombing and looting shown in the drawings directly contradict the Sudan government's version of events over the last four years of bloodshed.

The pattern that emerges from these drawings mirrors what we know about Darfur and shows a worryingly similar pattern of attacks developing in eastern Chad.

Waging Peace's 'Drawing Inspiration' is asking British children to respond to these drawings by creating pictures of their lives and families in order to offer support, prayer and sympathy to Darfuris in their time of trouble and despair.

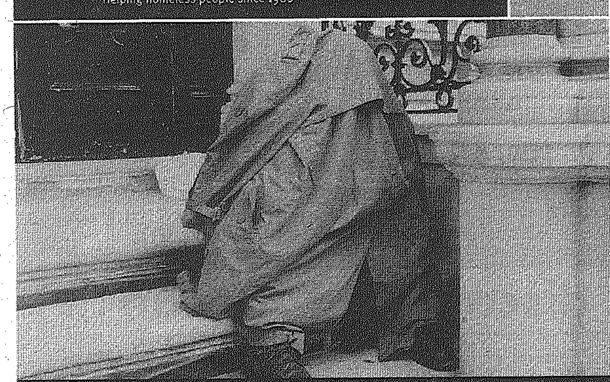
The drawings from the UK children will then be displayed in the refugee camps for the Darfuri children there so they can see that their peers across the globe are thinking of them.

The Darfuri children's drawings have been exhibited in London and across the world to raise awareness about the crisis in Darfur and are currently being displayed in St Mary's Church, Putney, in London.

It goes to show that mental health problems pay no heed to colour, class or geography. We must help charities like Anchor House and Waging Peace financially so they can continue their essential work.

For more details about the work these organisations do, or to make a donation, please visit: *www.wagingpeace.info* or: *www.anchorhouseuk.org*

The Passage
Helping homeless people since 1980



You'd rather not see this? Neither would we.

At The Passage, we'd rather see vulnerable people with a roof over their head, and support at hand, than out and alone on the streets.

To that end, our Day Centre opens its doors to over 200 people everyday, whilst our hostel, Passage House, has beds for 48 people and is open every night of the year. In addition, Montfort House provides 16 studio flats preparing people for independent living. Our aim is to support individuals back into a settled way of life, as well as meeting basic needs.

If you're interested in being a volunteer, would like to make a donation or would simply like more information, we'd love to hear from you.
Give us a call on **0845 880 0689**, email **info@passage.org.uk** or visit **www.passage.org.uk**

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Anchor House

working at the heart of homelessness

Anchor House is a Homeless Centre in Canning Town that provides a home and support for 118 people, and as a Catholic Charity we look after both their physical and spiritual well being regardless of race, creed or religion..

Our client group, both males and females have experienced a variety of problems in their lives that have resulted in them becoming homeless. The range of issues that we deal with are: unemployment, mental health problems, drug addiction, alcoholism, family breakdown and basic literacy, and often our residents have several issues that we have to assist them with.

Should you want further details about Anchor House please contact Keith Fernett, Director, Anchor House, 81, Barking Road, Canning Town, London E16 4HB
TEL: 0207 476 6062
Should you wish to visit Anchor House we would be glad to see you.

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