



The guide's writer feels that the homeless are not given adequate advice
Photo: Rex Features

A GUIDING LIGHT FOR THE HOMELESS

By Vivienne Benson and Judy Kerr

An enterprising mother was so struck by her experiences during a year of being forced to live in a B&B after becoming homeless, it inspired her to write a guide to help other rough sleepers. Deborah Leyser, from the south of England, has drawn on the problems she herself encountered as a homeless person to come up with practical tips on how to keep warm, where to sleep and how best to access council services. The 46-year-old careworker first came up with the idea of the how-to guide after befriending a homeless girl who was struggling with drug addiction. Leyser recalled: "This girl wanted to put her life back together. I made 22 phone calls no one could do anything, so I let her stay with me. "I realised how the councils weren't supplying as much

information as they should be," she continues. But it is not just councils that Leyser suggests are failing to provide adequate information for vulnerable individuals on the streets – or at risk of becoming homeless. "On our website I read, they suggested that if you are about to become homeless to buy a tent and a sleeping bag. I couldn't believe it – as if someone who can't find a place to live is thinking about buying camping equipment, or can afford to!" she pointed out. Leyser continued: "The girl I met is now getting her life together, and she actually contributed to some of the writing. The guide is very matter-of-fact; there is no judgement involved."

"One piece of advice suggested that the homeless should buy a tent. As if someone who can't find a place to live is thinking about buying camping equipment!"

As Leyser has also written guides for people living with disabilities, it gave her a head start researching her homeless guide. "The government figures just didn't match; they seem to play it down. You only have to walk around your local area to see what's really happening," Leyser argues. However, despite the fact that the innovative booklet Leyser has produced offers comprehensive advice about rights and benefits, she is having trouble finding a council willing to publish it. "Homelessness' is a dirty word," Leyser explains, adding that the local council 'switched off' when she contacted them. "I stuck the feeler out, but just hit brick walls," she said.

Leyser has already road tested the guide on several homeless individuals she knows – and gained positive feedback on its effectiveness.

Simon, 35, told *The Big Issue*: "Everything happened to me last year – I had three car crashes, I was diagnosed with osteoporosis, got behind on my mortgage payments, had fits, and as a result I lost my job.

"The housing authority said that I had made myself homeless, and there was nothing that could be said to convince them. They told me that when I got thrown out to come down with all my stuff, but still they didn't help me. They were fobbing me off the whole time," he alleged.

"I used Deborah's guide just as I was about to become homeless. It helped me realise that with my osteoporosis I was entitled to Disability Living Allowance and that meant I could get £3,000 a year," he explained.

Simon added: "It was also through the guide that I realised Salvation Army could help me – they actually found me somewhere to live."

For Leyser, a key element in understanding the root causes of homelessness is the connection between mental health issues and drug abuse and how these can trigger a downward spiral that leads onto the streets. Leyser's degree in Clinical Psychology gives her an understanding of the connection. "I knew when I finished my degree a few years ago that I wanted to have my own business that could help disadvantaged individuals."

Now she is hoping to persuade councils, libraries and even soup vans in her area to carry copies of her guide.

"I am willing to work for a council and adapt the guide to the local area, just as long as it gets out there – I am sure that once people get a voice, they can't be ignored."

For information on Deborah Leyser's other guides see www.friendlyguides.co.uk