

**‘You hear people talking about social exclusion but there are still people sitting outside this category, refugees for example. We need to target those who don’t even get included in the thinking about the “poverty line”. To do so, we need community-relevant, flexible and risk-friendly strategies’**

**Michael, 29**

**Number 4**  
**Accounting for the Uncounted**

**DAVID ROBINSON**

**Until we account for the Uncounted – people who, for whatever reason, are transient and ‘off-register’ – we will continue to underestimate the real scale of need in Britain’s most deprived areas**

In recent years we have become increasingly aware of the growing number of Community Links users who are permanent East London residents, but who are not registered as living here. Our experience suggests that this Uncounted population is largely made up of refugees, asylum-seekers, travellers and others – mainly 16- to 24-year-olds – who are, for whatever reason, transient and ‘off register’, as well as significant numbers of the very poorest people who disappeared when the Poll Tax was introduced in 1988. Almost certainly, some are here illegally or want to preserve their anonymity for particular reasons. Most, however, have nothing to hide and haven’t consciously hidden. They are simply outside and unable to find a way in.

We believe that the East London population is not only significantly bigger than the census figure for the area, but also that the deprivation in it is more extreme and the exclusion more acute than anything suggested in the official statistics, which reveal extraordinary inconsistencies. Consider, for instance, the experience of the East London and City Health Authority (ELCHA). The total official population in the area is between 605,000 and 610,000. But GP registrations number 710,000, and ELCHA believes that it serves an actual resident patient population of between 635,000 and 650,000.

The problem is that the sorts of people that we identify as Uncounted are also those who are most likely to gather in the poorest areas. As Newham and Hackney are two of the most deprived boroughs in England and Wales, the Uncounted population is, as a proportion of the whole, likely to be larger here

than almost anywhere else. National census statistics are equally unreliable, and again exclude the very poorest wherever they are to be found. For instance, it is estimated that between 1.7 per cent and 2.1 per cent of the UK population is excluded from the Family Expenditure Survey (an annual government survey, which, since 1957, has monitored the national rate of family income and expenditure). People living in ‘commercial’ premises – such as guest-houses, nursing homes for the elderly and disabled, hospitals and prisons – are all excluded from the FES, as are homeless people, those in mobile homes and travelling families who live at ‘unrecognised’ sites. Almost all are very poor but simply are not counted.

Does it matter? We believe it does. Failure to count those at the bottom means that decisions about the allocation of resources underestimate the scale of the need and particularly disadvantage those areas where there is the highest concentration of Uncounted people – inevitably the poorest communities. The Uncounted therefore either miss out on services altogether or end up competing in the most disadvantaged areas with members of the visible community who are already themselves experiencing multiple deprivation.

So what about solutions? These need to be on a national scale. Were it possible to produce a correct national census, which included *everyone*, the figures would tell a very different story, of a country with a lower national mean income and a higher number of people on low incomes. If we, as a society, are really serious about tackling social exclusion, we need to understand the scale of it. Government initiatives will all be flawed if they are based on an understanding that omits a significant proportion of the most deprived.

We at Community Links think this is important because day after day we see people who are *in* this community but are not a

*part* of it. They survive. If we have not hitherto known that they are here, how do they know that we are? If the children begging with cardboard cups outside Stratford tube station have never been to school, their continued absence won't feature in anybody's records and they won't be drawn in to programmes like ours. We can't meet need if we can't measure it or at least appreciate something of its scale.

Our power at Community Links is also, in a sense, our lack of power. We can't deport people or take away their children or their incomes. So we are trusted by those who are most excluded and who lack the skills, knowledge or confidence to access mainstream services. Our outreach work – particularly our Youth programme (the largest in the UK) – is important, but many of our building-based activities are also designed to address the needs of the most marginalised: our Teenage Health project, for example, the Asian women's support group *Apna Ghar* (see Chapter 8), and various other alternative education programmes.

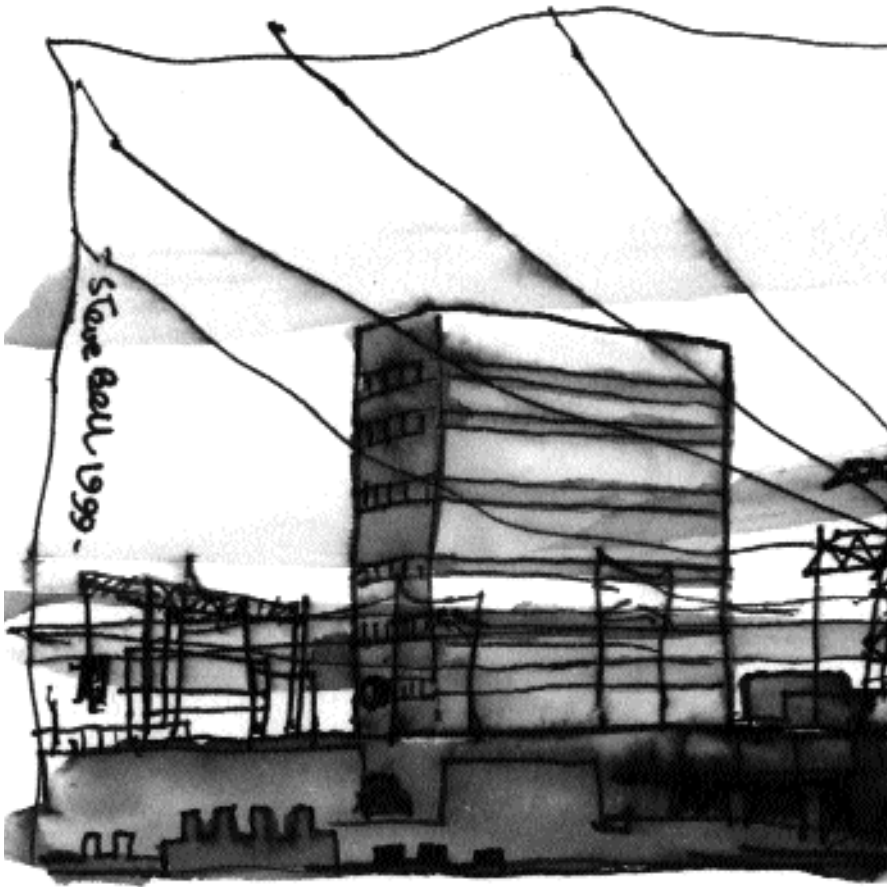
Of course, we can't do it all. Indeed, often we are not the best people to do it at all. Over the past two decades at Community Links, while becoming aware of the Uncounted residents in East London, we have also become aware of the plethora of informal self-help groups which many of these Uncounted residents have set up to meet their own needs. And, again and again, we have seen how the members of these small, informal groups have transformed their own lives and those of many others, producing extraordinary results that could never have been achieved within the professional bureaucracy. Such groups are not exclusive to East London, of course: as we at Community Links have begun to share our thinking further afield, we have repeatedly encountered other groups, which are doing terrific work on the ground, often among some of our most disadvantaged and marginalised communities, and which are operating entirely below the official water-

line. We believe that these groups, which, like the individuals who set them up, are completely Uncounted, are central to any vision of a truly inclusive society. Hence our First Steps training programme, a unique scheme which aims to equip small marginalised groups with the management skills they require to best meet the needs of their own communities. And also our pioneering development of the Social Enterprise Zone (see Chapter 6), which is extending the achievements of government programmes in this area.

Social policy makers now recognise that individual volunteering is a pillar of the welfare state and that in fact almost half of the population is involved in providing essential support (shopping for an elderly housebound neighbour, for example, or helping with childcare) which would otherwise need to be provided by government. When research was undertaken a few years ago, the scale of this 'invisible' contribution was a surprise to almost everybody. We believe that informal community groups are a second pillar of the welfare state – perhaps even more important, but even more invisible.

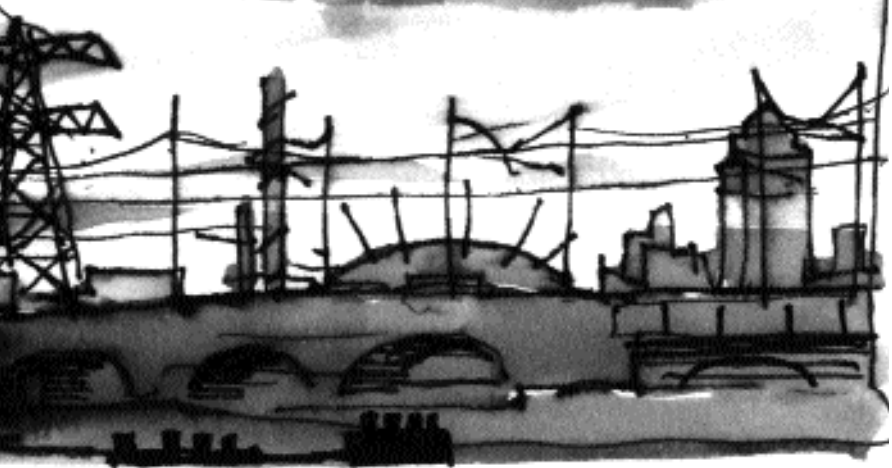
Does it matter? Again we believe it does. Collectively there is a huge amount of work of this sort going on, and much of it concerns groups and individuals who are excluded from almost every level of organised society – whether it be schools and GPs, or funding opportunities, or dialogue with government, or simply the possibility of gaining wider public awareness.

And yet these groups represent the future. Over the last five to ten years the country's biggest voluntary agencies have been increasingly invited by the Government to deliver a wide range of services and programmes which would formerly have been handled by local and central government agencies. Consequently, the Shaftsbury Society (a children's charity) now derives 90 per cent of its income from government, Mencap 87 per cent, The Leonard Cheshire Foundation 80 per cent (figures taken



**Cartoon by Steve Bell**

# NEW HAM GATEWAY TO THE ORIENT



from Involuntary Action, published by The Institute of Economic Affairs). And as the professionalised voluntary sector has largely abandoned its founding purpose, so the responsibility for reaching out to the most marginalised in society has shifted from these quasi-statutory, mega charities to the most lively, inspired and well-rooted community groups.

It should be said that, in the last two and a half years, there has been a flurry of new government policies which have sought to tackle the needs of the excluded. We now have a Social Exclusion Unit within the Prime Minister's team at Downing Street and there are new programmes like Sure Start, which are addressing not just the symptoms but also the causes. It is too early, of course, to make judgments about Sure Start at this stage, but the initiative is being closely monitored and the American Head Start programme on which it is based (a scheme set up two decades ago in the United States to provide intensive support for pre-school children and their families) has produced extraordinary results.

Community Links is a committed local partner in all this activity, but still we are troubled by the fear that it is only focusing on the needs of those that we have counted, and that it will be delivered by agencies who lack either the will, the understanding or the capacity to dig deeper. Thus, it may well be possible to achieve all the public sector performance targets and yet still to find, in a decade's time, ten-year-old children begging on Stratford station and mothers buying dog food in the Rathbone market even though they have no dog.

We need to increase our understanding of the Uncounted. In these days of sophisticated data collection and control, are we really unable to count how many people live in our poorest communities? Perhaps if they voted or had a little more spending power we might have found a way of counting them. The fact is, of

course, that they could prove to be expensive, and they certainly won't help in the short term with the school and hospital league tables. So we count them out. This means that the performance targets stay manageable and that only the other, less poor people who live here (but who still don't vote or spend as much as the majority of the population) know about the waiting times in casualty – dramatically extended, in this area, by families who don't have and apparently can't get a GP. Most of these Un-counted families would be recognised as homeless if they were recognised at all and many will include children who are receiving no officially supervised education or even basic protection. We need to introduce resource allocation procedures based on methods of data collection that don't exclude the poorest.

At the same time we need to acknowledge that agencies which have failed to connect with the most excluded people in the past aren't the right people to do it now, at least not on their own. And this is where the informal community groups come in. We need first to recognise and then to support these groups. This would bring the highest possible returns. Some of the participants of our First Steps training programme have already achieved extraordinary results. One, the Somali Women's Association, attracted more than 2,000 Somali women to its first meeting. Our priority is to help these groups expand and become more effective – to encourage them to share and inspire good practice, to help them connect the unconnected to mainstream services and to the wider community, but all without diluting the personal experience, the commitment and the dynamism that makes them special.

We also need to help the groups build up links with each other. Our First Steps experience has shown us that connections between groups, often tackling the same issues albeit with completely separate user groups, have a different but equal value to connections from top to bottom. We dream of an informal com-

munity 'network' – all sorts of groups linked one to another in small and practical ways, mutually supportive, self-sustaining, practical, visionary, and with deep roots in our most disadvantaged communities, but with branches reaching out to the highest offices in the land. Such a living organism would bear fruit for us all.

Every year the Community Links Ideas Annual features more than 100 schemes and proposals, already working in communities across the UK. Perhaps the Government could help us to build on this scheme by establishing the target of '500 Small Steps' for this Millennium year. One or two of these Steps might be big programmes run from the top down. These would be flagships with the capacity to demonstrate government commitment and affect major change, but which, by definition, because they are controlled from the centre, are likely to be relatively inflexible. Alongside these programmes we might develop a bottom-up approach, encouraging the growth and sharing of small but practical ideas on the ground. We could promote a high-profile national process for drawing in and sharing these ideas. We would have to recognise, of course, that identifying 500 Small Steps is just a beginning. Significant change would take a generation. But even the longest journey begins with individual steps.

And what about the obstacles? Too many new government programmes are driven from the centre. Management by numbers. How do we develop a public service culture which values initiative, encourages flexibility and even, within reasonable bounds, embraces risk? All of this is necessary if we really are to reach the most excluded. Our Social Enterprise Zone (See Chapter 6) is working on some practical ideas, but tackling the culture of public service in the UK is perhaps the biggest challenge. We need secondments, exchanges, the opening up of quangos and a clear message from the Government that doing

things differently is not only allowed, it is positively encouraged.

Above all, in the new Millennium we look for a recognition that beyond the excluded there are the Uncounted – ordinary people like you and me, who are working with huge commitment to rebuild lives eroded by ill-health, enforced dislocation or family breakdown and poverty, always poverty. Until we account for the Uncounted, some in our poorest areas will live with a degree of deprivation that most of us would think unthinkable in 21st-century Britain, many will experience community services that are grossly overstretched and thus measurably inferior to comparable services elsewhere and every one of us will live in a society that has turned down, by default or by design, the willing and vibrant contribution of a significant minority.

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