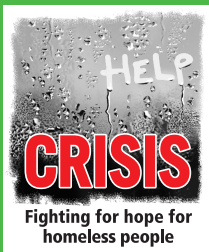


Include Me In

How life skills help homeless people back into work

Hannah Lownsborough

DEMOS



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About Crisis

Crisis is the national charity for single homeless people and works year-round to help vulnerable and marginalised people get through the crisis of homelessness, fulfill their potential and transform their lives. Crisis develops innovative services that help homeless people rebuild their social and practical skills, join the world of work and reintegrate into society.

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1 Escaping exclusion: work, life skills and moving away from homelessness

For the last decade, homelessness has been an issue that has demanded unrelenting attention from policy-makers. A significant reduction in the number of rough sleepers on Britain's streets and a renewed commitment to rehousing homeless families in bed and breakfast accommodation have resulted in major change for a majority of the people experiencing homelessness, embedding the idea that governments should take seriously their responsibility to guarantee the right of every citizen to an acceptable standard of living. But the focus on addressing the basic minimum has not always led to sustainable improvement in people's quality of life. For many homeless people, shelter is not enough to ensure a permanent step away from the cycle of disadvantage and exclusion.

Include Me In: How life skills help homeless people back into work offers one model for responding to the growing gap between improved outcomes in the short term and building sustainable foundations for social inclusion over much longer periods. Meeting basic needs can form only part of the story of an individual's return to the mainstream. *Include Me In* suggests that connecting people with wider opportunities to get and keep work is a key way that we can enable people to maintain integration after an initial success in breaking away from homelessness.

Jobs are one of the key routes away from social exclusion, offering a pathway towards financial and social independence. As with any other strategy for addressing the problems faced by people with such deep-rooted challenges in their lives, this will not be an approach that works for everyone. Some people with serious mental health issues or long-term substance abuse problems may not be able to take on full-time work.¹ Others may need additional sources of stability to be in place before a job can seem a realistic possibility.² But jobs are part of the solution for many people living with serious, long-term disadvantage and poverty.

At the Crisis Skylight centre, homeless people are given the opportunity to develop their skills through a range of activities, such as art, crafts, bike repair and creative writing.³ As a result, Skylight and other, similar projects play a critical role for homeless and excluded people. In *Survival Skills*,⁴ Demos suggested that these initiatives were valuable because those running the projects refused to accept that people coming from challenging circumstances were without the life skills that must form a baseline on which to build other learning and relationships. Workers and volunteers at projects like Skylight took the view that years of living on the margins of society had stripped people of an awareness of their ability to have an impact on the outcomes of their own lives. Centres like Skylight give people a safe place to reassess their perceptions of their own self-efficacy and so begin to take more control over their lives.

However, even with this basis for moving forward, identifying a strategy for building on those positive steps can be extremely difficult. Finding a setting that is sufficiently flexible to cope with a period of major readjustment, but also sufficiently predictable to allow more stable routines to take hold, can be incredibly difficult. But when people's steps to create a new life fail, the subsequent return to previous lifestyles or behaviours can be as, or more, extreme than before. Each unsuccessful attempt can entrench the patterns of the marginalised lifestyle more deeply. Tackling the long-term disadvantage experienced by this group of people will mean engaging a whole range of different strategies for supporting them back into healthier and more sustainable lifestyles.

For many people, paid work and the associated social and learning opportunities that go with it are a vital part of sustaining a new, more stable lifestyle. Experiences of communities with endemic long-term unemployment testify to the fact that worklessness has a profound effect on people's sense of themselves and their value, even when it is not combined with some of the other, more extreme forms of exclusion often encountered by people who become homeless.⁵ Equally, for organisations aiming to address the difficulties faced by people experiencing homelessness, finding ways to bring people into lasting employment has consistently been a high priority.⁶ Giving homeless and excluded adults jobs gives them a chance to escape the negative social labelling which means that people see them only in terms of their problems.

Demos researchers spent time interviewing and observing the work at Crisis's Skylight centre, in east London. Many centre members were clear about their aspirations for getting into full-time work.

I would like to work eventually. I'd like to find a job that I can use to earn.

It's important to have a job. It means that you can be independent.

Other research also confirms that getting homeless people into work may be one of the main ways to ensure that they don't return to old lifestyles after an initial successful starting period.⁷

In many ways, this is good news for policy-makers. This group of most excluded adults is extremely costly to the UK, in terms of both social and economic expense.⁸ They offer some of the starkest examples of the ways that disadvantage attracts more disadvantage: not only is poverty problematic in itself, but it also means that people are more likely to have poor housing, ill-health and low skill levels, ending in homelessness, drug addiction or offending for some.⁹ Finding ways to meet their needs and support them to make different choices about how they live is key to breaking the cycle of severe social exclusion.¹⁰

Since 1997, the Labour government has been very clear about its commitment to bring down unemployment through state-delivered programmes to get people back to work. The various versions of the New Deal (for young people or for disabled people) were time-limited, high-impact initiatives that were intended to equip people with the skills, support and advice that they needed to get into work and did so with varying levels of success.¹¹ Some targeted programmes, such as E2E (Entry to Employment) were created to meet the needs of particularly ‘at risk’ parts of the population.¹² Others, like Connexions, offered a wider range of services, but employment was among the outcomes that they were asked to work towards.¹³

Some of these programmes were adapted to meet the needs of homeless and other profoundly excluded adults, with some success. But in many cases, they were not really appropriate for those with the greatest needs, perhaps because it was assumed that for some of these groups, other provision had to be in place before attempts were made at finding employment. The major investment in getting people back to work largely benefited those individuals closest to the labour market in the first place – those for whom a return to work was a relatively small step.¹⁴

For those who were most marginalised, the impact was only small.

To begin to address the needs of these vulnerable and often demanding adults, we must recognise the value of investment in those seemingly very far from returning to work, as well as those for whom short training courses and advice on CV presentation and interview technique will be sufficient. Working towards employment with these adults will mean investing not only in the technical and vocational skills they need to get a job, but in supporting work that is prepared to tackle people’s perceptions of excluded adults, including their own impressions of themselves, and their skills.

2 Breaking down barriers: obstacles to returning to work for homeless people

Making this sort of investment demands a clearer understanding of the obstacles that come into play when homeless people try to access the labour market.

At the moment, much thinking about homeless people tends to homogenise them into a single, monolithic group, with broadly similar reasons for finding themselves without a place to live. This assumption is used to justify offering services that struggle to cope with many variations in need. This is particularly the case for those services that are already dealing with a large and diverse client group; many of these services are linked with the employment market, Jobcentre Plus, for

example. But the effectiveness of their work will consistently be limited if they fail to attend to the specific needs of the individuals they work with.

There are different sorts of homeless people. You need to understand that first . . . the help I need [as an ex-asylum seeker] is different to the help the drinkers need, or the people taking drugs.

Skylight member

The limited awareness of people's distinctive starting points also manifests itself in a degree of insensitivity to people's wider identities when accessing services. One SkyLight member had had to ask a social worker to leave his flat on her first visit, because he felt she was inappropriately dressed for a meeting alone with him in his hostel room.

Other problems arise in relation to people's past employment experience. Many homeless people have had previous work experience; some have had jobs for years and are highly qualified. Some of these people would like to re-enter their old career, but need detailed advice and intensive support on making up the training deficit since they were last in work.

It would cost me around £7,000 to get the training I need to go back into engineering. How are they going to be able to help me with that?

Skylight member

Others face difficulties because it is assumed that they will embrace a return to an old area of expertise, when actually the circumstances that led to their eventual homelessness were connected with that area of work, making it a hostile environment in which to establish a longer-lasting set of sustainable choices.

For both these groups of people, starting with their individual experiences and preferences will be essential for success; a standardised response based exclusively on a local area's 'skills gaps' and employers' reported preferences for new recruits will be unlikely to give them the confidence and motivation to make a last step away from exclusion.¹⁵

In *System Failure*,¹⁶ Jake Chapman makes the case for using a different set of thinking tools for understanding problems such as those faced by homeless people trying to re-enter employment. Our tendency, he explains, is to try to break problems apart into their smallest components and then address each of the smaller problems individually, on the basis that when we reconstruct the situation into a whole, the smaller solutions will amalgamate into a response to the whole issue. But this mechanistic approach to addressing the problems in people's lives and society as a whole will often be unsatisfactory, because of the number and unpredictability of variable elements in the system.

At the moment, many of the inventions that homeless people encounter correspond to this mechanistic model of thinking.

On a given week, they may have contact with a job centre, probation officer, mental health services, drug treatment centres and their own hostel; they may also choose to go to other day centres or training services.¹⁷ Many of those services respond to a particular problem, rather than to the person as whole. Increasingly, the ‘point of integration’ for all these services aiming to support people back into the mainstream is actually the individuals themselves.

This is not necessarily problematic in itself. The personalisation agenda in government makes it very clear that there will be a decisive step towards giving individuals more and more control over the way that they engage with public services.¹⁸ In this sense, some aspects of the provision that homeless people receive reflect the way that services are more generally. It is certainly an improvement on the dogmatic approach of the past, in which people in dire circumstances were further diminished by professionals and public servants making endless decisions on their behalf.

But in asking homeless people to become sufficiently service-literate to be able to make good choices for themselves about the best ways to meet their needs, we are making a serious demand upon people already facing extremely challenging circumstances in their lives. For this expectation to be a reasonable one, and to have the positive consequences for them that we would hope, we need to be prepared to tackle the problems inherent within our current system.

As is often the case, some of the most frustrating manifestations of these problems happen in the minutiae of day-to-day interactions. At Skylight, one of the most consistent observations that people made about getting a job related to the availability of the necessary personal information for starting work, such as national insurance numbers and previous addresses.¹⁹

It's unrealistic to expect people to have this information to hand when they've had nowhere to keep things safe for several months, or years.

Homeless support worker

Equally, others reported difficulties in dealing with ‘holes’ in their CVs, which are difficult to explain to employers. People talked about trying to select the best option from a series of undesirable choices.

So what am I supposed to do? Cover it up? Or tell the truth and not get the job?

Skylight member

For others, serious difficulties emerged from being part of alcohol and drug recovery programmes, many of which are understandably very clear that their users should not start work while still in their full-time provision.

I'm trying to persuade them [the alcohol recovery programme] to let me work, but I can't stay in the programme if I do.

Skylight member

This can be particularly difficult for those on methadone programmes, with former addicts required to attend clinics during narrow time periods that clash with conventional work hours.²⁰

Many homeless people also belong to groups that are already more likely to experience discrimination: the disabled and long-term sick and members of minority ethnic communities, for example.²¹ They are more likely to have mental health problems, which many employers wrongly believe to rule out full-time work.²² One Skylight member said that most people saw him only in terms of his bipolar disorder, as a 'mentally upset nobody'.

Attitudes among employers also need to change; homeless people cannot be expected to successfully challenge the values of a system that has excluded them for many years, while also trying to establish themselves within the same system that they are challenging. Sometimes, it is the stigma attached to homelessness itself that is the issue.²³ People in Skylight frequently reported that there was a lack of understanding from employers about the 'type' of person that became homeless.

Employers need educating that the homeless are just normal people that had jobs before but circumstances interfered. People

see homeless people as never having had a job but many alcoholics in particular often have had very good careers.

Skylight member

These misunderstandings and prejudices make re-entering work even more challenging for homeless people.

These smaller issues are suggestive of a set of wider tensions that operate within the system as a whole. These tensions, as outlined below, may be inevitable, but a system of support that is more successful at helping people get and keep work will have to find ways to reduce them.

Guaranteeing a basic minimum but also raising aspirations

Services are often torn between ensuring that people have access to the provision to meet their basic needs, while also trying to engage in a dialogue about future aspirations and training.²⁴ The aims of the service can act in opposition to the aims of the individuals with whom they are trying to work. Jobcentre Plus, for instance, brings together the benefits system with services to help people find work. With limited resources, workers can find themselves struggling to help with the longer-term aim of creating sustained ambition and enthusiasm for work, when more pressing demands are emerging from people going through periods of crisis.

Responding to chaotic lifestyles from within a rigid policy

framework Chaotic lifestyles continue to be a reality, or a recent memory, for many homeless people trying to find work. The

unpredictability and impulsivity that shape these life patterns can mean that unexpected barriers to work can emerge, and people may need additional support to get through the unforeseen events that may cause problems with a job while they are being resolved. But rigid policy structure, while designed around the needs of people in these situations, is often extremely restricted in the responses it is able to make, with time delays and chains of command that make it hard to work within the fluid and changing setting of many homeless people's lives.²⁵

Starting from people's individual experiences, while struggling to acknowledge failure elsewhere in the system For a majority of people experiencing homelessness, involvement with statutory and voluntary services has been a reality for a period of time. Many rough sleepers, for instance, are careleavers, or have served a prison sentence. In order to really engage with their particular starting places and create a trusting relationship with users, it is important to be able to acknowledge that the services have probably failed in the past. But acknowledging failure in this way can be very difficult for service providers, which does little to allay the cynicism of potential users.

Emphasis on evidence-based policy-making, but a growing understanding of the importance of hard to measure skills Policy decisions should rest upon sound evidence of what has worked in the past and should be assessed continually for their ongoing effectiveness. But at times, this can conflict with the delivery of training in the vital 'softer' skills – which are hard

to quantify and measure – that so many socially excluded people need to be able to move on.²⁶ Equally, the implicit commitment to determining the 'right' answer to a particular problem can undermine the extent to which people are open to new and emerging evidence that suggests earlier judgements might be out of date.

Choice, coercion and deciding how to tolerate bad decisions

Voluntary participation is an important part of what makes many policy interventions work. Coercion raises difficult questions about the extent to which the state wishes to impose its preferences upon people, even those at the very margins of society. But, equally, many people experiencing severe disadvantage are engaging in behaviours that have the potential to seriously reduce their quality of life, as well as to shorten it in many cases. A system which embraces choice needs to find a way to deal appropriately with people making 'bad' choices, as well as acknowledge that the learning that follows from making and remaking difficult choices can be a vital part of a learning and development process.

For statutory systems to take steps towards reducing some of these difficulties, however, they must ensure that they are integrated with the efforts and needs of other organisations. Lasting change will only be achieved if the perspectives of employers, as well as the existing voluntary provision, are brought to bear on the way in which support is offered in the future.

3 Back to business: employers and returning to work

Creating real opportunities for people leaving behind homelessness means engaging fully with the realities of the labour market in which they will be operating. Working with employers to develop an understanding of their perspective on offering jobs to people with a history of homelessness is the only way to ensure that people are given the chance to make real progress when they return to work.

There is good evidence that some employers are more than willing to consider offering jobs to people who have experienced difficulties with homelessness in the past. Business Action on Homelessness, for example, works with over 200 companies in cities throughout the UK, reintroducing homeless people to regular work and, in some cases, to permanent posts. These employers report good outcomes from working with homeless people, explaining that the contribution that they make overall is a valuable one, both as individuals and through making a tangible, public statement about the ethos of the company as a whole.²⁷ But even supported schemes like Business Action on Homelessness can run into difficulties in enabling employers to execute their plans to employ homeless people.

Among some employers, there is still a degree of uncertainty about the possibilities for supported entry into work. There are

a range of options available for people who are moving gradually back into work, and many statutory schemes are more flexible than might initially seem obvious. But these can be reasonably complex and hard for smaller companies especially to engage with. Others are concerned about additional levels of risk with employing a homeless or ex-homeless person, particularly among people who have a history of offending. For employers to offer jobs to people who are homeless, there must be access to trusted sources of support to ensure that they are able to access advice when needed.

Some of the most serious difficulties that emerge can be connected to the individual employee's training and development needs, however. Much training focuses on the technical and vocational skills that people need for taking on a new role in an organisation. For people closer to returning to the labour market, this may be a suitable model. But employers sometimes report that people who enter their organisations from more difficult starting points struggle more with the day-to-day relationships, expectations and interactions of the workplace.

Employers' comments on this type of issue are also reflected in the experiences reported by homeless people themselves. For many, it is essential to have a degree of control about the stage at which they return to work. Often, other people make decisions about what sort of help should come first. People initially access crisis intervention services, and then follow a

seemingly preordained progression through health services, stable living arrangements, training and then work. But understanding the role that employment can play in giving people the opportunity to escape homelessness will mean abandoning some of the assumptions about the 'right' order of progression and improvement, which can actually be more like a trap that hinders progress.²⁸ Life skills are essential for homeless people returning to work because they give them the best chance of negotiating the complex system in which they are functioning and, to some extent, escape the progression trap for themselves by setting their own priorities for moving on.

One key way of avoiding the progression trap is to take a far broader view of what constitutes training for employment. Many homeless people report a need to be able to access training and development activities without subsequently feeling obliged to move into work. Equally, the close connection between homelessness and isolation means that for others, the chance to build a more robust social network will be the most important precursor to getting a job.²⁹ Alongside employers' observations about emotional and social job-readiness, this makes a compelling case for engaging with development work that gives people a different sort of opportunity for learning, rather than solely that which aims at employment. This includes the chance to develop the life skills that support positive relationships in and outside of work.

Life skills development is significant for employability in a number of ways:

Life skills help to maintain the stability necessary to remain in employment Many initiatives targeted at addressing unemployment find that frequently, it is not finding people a job that is difficult, but helping them to keep it.³⁰ Life skills offset the sort of chaotic lifestyles that can make employment difficult to sustain, as well as giving people the tools to ask for help with difficult situations when they need it.

Life skills development as a forerunner to vocational training Learning practical life skills can frequently act as a gateway for learning the same skills in a more technical way, so that it becomes relevant for employers. Cooking is one obvious example; numerous organisations working with life skills have examples of clients who have progressed from basic cooking and nutrition to finding work in professional kitchens.³¹ Equally, however, courses in DIY and budgeting can enable people to identify areas in which they would like to find employment.

Life skills act as a conduit to convert previous negative experiences to valuable professional understanding Life skills, especially the 'softer' skills are associated with forming relationships and becoming more self-aware. Often, the benefits of this are realised not only in present behaviour and attitudes, but also in the ways in which past experiences are understood, analysed and communicated to other people.

Frequently, organisations may find that people working with life skills are gradually able to take increasingly significant roles in supporting other people in difficult circumstances, with some becoming staff members of organisations similar to those where they first became engaged. At Fairbridge, for example, young people entering the organisation because of serious problems with offending, drug misuse or anti-social behaviour frequently move into positions on the staff, with about one in four Fairbridge staff having originally entered the programme as a client.³²

Although measuring the gains deriving from life skills work is difficult through conventional strategies for assessment, it is also likely that building life skills has a positive impact on people's abilities to get and keep the jobs that they want, as a result of strengthening certain critical areas of development that affect most people's success or failure at work. In particular, life skills work reinforces people's capacities in three areas:

Self-perception and self-assessment Social exclusion can affect the capacity to judge one's own abilities, as a result of situations that would endanger most people's sense of self-worth (eg an abusive relationship), and also by the repeated failure to engage with a system in which many people seem to operate successfully.³³ Life skills training challenges people's misperceptions about their own abilities. Much life skills development work makes use of self- and peer-assessment, giving participants the ability to assess their own achievements

without their judgement being coloured by other, negative experiences they may have had previously.³⁴ As a result, participants' greater understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses makes them more able to apply for jobs that suit their level of skill and talent. They are also in a better position to develop once they are in their new post. A change in their self-perception can also mean that people start to see previous difficult experiences as a valuable perspective to have on subsequent roles they may take, rather than something of which to be ashamed. This, in turn, means they stand a better chance of enabling those whom they work with to understand their past, rather than being alienated by people's suspicions about the struggles they may have faced in the past.

Improved coping and engagement strategies Marginalised lifestyles frequently require people to adopt a range of mechanisms for coping with circumstances beyond the range of experience that many people have encountered. But with a move back into the mainstream, these strategies for dealing with difficult situations can seem extreme and out of place, making it hard for people for to reintegrate in workplaces and social groups. Life skills development work can help, partly because it changes some of the patterns of rejection for its participants, but also because it gives people the opportunity to develop their own strategies for dealing with testing situations in which they find themselves.³⁵ Giving people a clearer sense of their own value and talents is important, but won't necessarily be enough to offset the damage done earlier

in a person's life, leaving them with 'Achilles' heels', that make them vulnerable to behaving in ways that an employer would find unacceptable. Rather than being critical of people's existing behaviours, life skills programmes will work with users from their own starting point, supporting them through the process of replacing some of these testing behaviours with improved strategies for dealing with challenging situations.³⁶

Renewed capacity for personal development For many people experiencing social exclusion, generations of disappointed ambitions give rise to low aspirations. Combined with the other potentially detrimental effects of life on a low income, this can make the possibility of progression within a job or training seem beyond the bounds of possibility.³⁷ Excluded people may compound their situation by taking the only jobs that are accessible, ie in low-paid, poorly managed industries, with little possibility of progression. The result is that for people already struggling to stay in work, their situation is made even harder by being in organisations where their aspirations are kept low, and the chances of being able to decisively escape poverty remain slim. Gains made in achieving a more stable lifestyle can start to seem insignificant, as they haven't led to the 'real' mainstream; people are instead locked in a limbo of low pay and low horizons, which serve only to make chaotic lifestyles attractive again. Life skills work makes a constructive, long-term contribution to people's position in employment. Through engaging in a range of new skills-based activities, members of life skills schemes are given the chance

to 'learn to learn', so when training opportunities come up at work, life skills participants will be well placed to take full advantage of them. Equally, the action planning that most life skills courses involves (participants will identify a longer-term plan for themselves once they have attended for a period of time, to ensure there is some cohesion to their programme of work), enables people to consider their own personal development at work, and to look beyond the boundaries of their present role if necessary.³⁸

Programmes that give people the chance to develop life skills *alongside* building towards getting a job are still not common within existing projects and services. For the benefits from projects like these to be more widespread it is essential that we learn lessons from the strategies that they use to achieve success.

4 Learning the lessons: understanding what works

Some of the most effective programmes for addressing life skills, homelessness and unemployment have certain shared characteristics, whether they happen as a first-step initiative drawing people back into accessing services, or as the final stage before re-entering work.

Navigability: single points of contact within trusted organisations and clear explanations about plans for the future Services for people at risk from homelessness are becoming increasingly varied, as are the options for returning to work. Programmes need to offer single points of contact from which people can draw on expertise about options within the sector as a whole. This often takes the form of one-to-one support relationships within which employment can be discussed alongside other issues, for example, at Connection at St Martin's.³⁹ Centrepoin's Lifeskills and Youthwork Services aim to offer their members support for personal and social development.⁴⁰

Chance to develop potential: working and learning in a way that engages with people's talents, rather than low-paid, low-aspiration roles For employment to provide lasting change, people need to be introduced to jobs that will give them the opportunity to grow and develop. Offering services that are more tailored to individuals' needs and preferences is not only about giving good quality advice, but is also about raising people's expectations and supporting their growth. The Changing Lives scheme run by Crisis offers grants to people who are single and homeless, to further their potential in their career, either through training, the purchase of equipment or, in some cases, by setting up their own businesses. Business Action on Homelessness places people with large national or regional companies within which there is the potential for further progression. At Marks &

Spencer, their dedicated 'Marks and Start' scheme aims to meet the needs of homeless and formerly homeless employees.⁴¹

Broad definition of the skills for employability Projects need to take a broad view of what skills will prove relevant to getting a job. Crisis Skylight engages with this idea by offering a range of courses, some of which are intended to further develop skills like literacy and numeracy, while others operate primarily as an opportunity for building good personal and social skills. At STEPS, a craft-based project run by St Mungo's, homeless people are employed by an operating wood workshop, but the emphasis is as much on learning reliability and punctuality as it is on learning how to operate the machinery and work with the materials.⁴² The Depaul Trust has developed a 'Drive Ahead Pre-Employment' course, which uses the theory part of the driving test to address issues related to anger management and communication skills, as well as addressing long-term literacy needs.⁴³

Sustainability: being able to return for advice when it is needed, from both professionals and peers On re-entering employment, it is vital that people are given the chance to return to organisations for advice and support during critical periods. Business Action on Homelessness are currently exploring a range of different options for establishing more sustained relationships between participants on their courses who then move into permanent roles. Equally, Employment Link at St

Mungo's offers a sustained connection with users who have then moved into work. Other organisations offer a comparable service on a more informal basis, or by ensuring that people are able to stay in sheltered or supported housing until a time when they are able to move into a different property with confidence.

Addressing people's needs on returning to work means recognising the extent to which homeless people, like many others trying to access services, need to feel that they have some control over the processes of which they are part. Equally, creating the climate for a return to work is about much more than simply equipping people with the technical skills they need for a particular job. It also depends on giving them the necessary skills to build and sustain relationships, and maintain self-awareness, that both employers and prospective employees recognise as central to getting and keeping a job.

5 Recommendations

For a lasting transformation in the situation for homeless and socially excluded people trying to get back to work, we need to address both the short-term, practical barriers that people experience in returning to work, as well as the more deep-rooted difficulties linked to the values and assumptions that shape our attitudes to jobs and work. We should focus our effort on three main areas:

- Gain a clearer understanding of the nature of the barriers to employment, as well as the characteristics of the individuals and organisations that have successfully broken them down in the past.
- Improve the flows of information moving around the sector as a whole – to and from homeless people, employers and practitioners working in the organisation.
- Intervene at critical times and places within the system to enable positive outcomes in the longer term.

UNDERSTAND

Invest in focused work to increase understanding of the different groups within the homeless population, and make the findings accessible to people experiencing homelessness, as well as to practitioners and policy-makers

Recent public campaigns on homelessness have promoted a far more sophisticated analysis of what 'homelessness' actually means, with high-profile campaigns calling on people to acknowledge the circumstances of the 'hidden homeless': homeless families and those living in poor housing. But this approach does not acknowledge the different circumstances that lead to people becoming homeless, which featured at least as prominently as housing in their explanations of the barriers to getting a job. Research needs to be undertaken that leads to greater clarity about the different aspects of the risk factors that combine to trigger or deepen homelessness. This research

should give rise to a richer knowledge base which can be turned into practical improvements for individuals and organisations.

Explore 'what works': draw on existing expertise in the business community

Within the business community there are companies that effectively offer employment to homeless and ex-homeless people. Some are part of specially designed schemes offered to businesses and partially delivered by the voluntary sector. Others are social enterprises that have been created with a view to offering homeless people jobs. Some are small businesses, making recruitment decisions on a case-by-case basis. For each of these, there are a range of examples of companies that have reversed the trend of unemployability among homeless people; many report a range of positive spin-off benefits from offering jobs to people from challenging circumstances. A detailed examination of these successful models for employment should be undertaken, with a view to drawing out lessons for other employers. A series of detailed case studies of the most successful examples should be published, to enable the transfer of practice between employers offering jobs to homeless people, and those wanting to begin to do so.

Homeless skills audit: explore what homeless people are already able to do

In most assessments of skills among homeless people, there is an expectation that somebody who has experienced

homelessness will have serious skills gaps that need addressing before attempts are made to find the person work. This implies a 'glass half empty' view; it defines homeless people in terms of what they lack. In addition, it often fails to take into account skills that come from people having difficult life experiences, such as resilience, or an ability to bond quickly with others in a similar position to themselves. Finally, a system that tends to focus on where people fall short may fail to cope with those people who seem to be highly qualified but still cannot break into the labour market. Researchers should undertake a skills audit of a cross-section of homeless and ex-homeless people, focusing on their talents and abilities. Having a clear picture of what people are able to do, in addition to the copious amounts of research that focus upon skills 'gaps' and 'deficits', will make an important and positive contribution to formulating a constructive shared approach to supporting homeless people into work.

INFORM AND ADVISE

Dispel the myths: provide clear information for employers about offering jobs to homeless people

A significant number of the homeless people interviewed explained that employers had poor expectations of people who were or had been homeless. There was pessimism among employers about the potential for recovery from long-term drug addiction or reoffending rates for ex-prisoners offered jobs, which made employing a homeless person appear to be a far greater risk than it actually is. These misapprehensions are

understandable given the public portrayal of socially excluded people, but for employment to be an option for people who are homeless, it is important that they are corrected. There should be a combined effort from government and the voluntary sector to provide accurate information to employers about the realities of employing homeless people in their organisations. There should be opportunities for employers to seek advice on the issues that concern them. And employers with experience of employing people with a history of homelessness should be given opportunities to advise and educate their peers, providing credible examples of practical approaches that have worked.

Provide 'real' careers advice

The type of careers advice offered to homeless people can differ significantly from that given to others. Once again, assumptions made about relative skill levels create an 'advice ceiling'; jobs requiring above a certain degree of competence, experience or qualification are excluded. But for homeless people as for everyone else, a vital part of entering a job and remaining in it relates to aspiration – most people are, at least in part, motivated to work by the hope that it will one day lead to a better-paid or more interesting role. Turnover rates in low-paid, low-aspiration work are high, because people struggle to sustain motivation for work that has no apparent long-term significance for their lives. Homeless people are no different and, if anything, are more vulnerable to leaving employment than others. Advice must also acknowledge the fact that for

some people, a distressing interlude in their lives would rule out a return to their previous form of employment; even homeless people who are highly qualified may not wish to return to their previous area of work. In terms of sustaining employment, the opportunity to retrain is one that needs to be offered universally to homeless people, not only to those with limited qualifications. 'Real' careers advice – the same careers advice that is provided for people who haven't been homeless – is central to making these more differentiated offers to homeless people possible.

Learn from those who know: near-peer mentoring for homeless people in work

Mentoring, or 'coaching', have been mentioned repeatedly throughout the research process. For homeless people aiming to get into work, developing good coping strategies for difficult times can be vital. Often, the best person to teach those coping strategies is someone who has had similar experiences themselves. 'Near peers', or people who have recently been in comparable situations, can offer the best mentoring for people newly in work. Although a degree of overlap in the type of employment can also be helpful, an understanding of a shared starting point can often be more valuable; colleagues at work can explain aspects of the job, but few will be able to imagine how it feels to come into a role after extended periods of severe social exclusion and disadvantage. A cohesive near-peer mentoring service would – if organised jointly by the voluntary sector and organisations employing (or hoping to employ)

homeless and ex-homeless people – provide the type of support that is so essential for people making their first critical steps back to employment.

ENABLE

Benefits: ease the transition

For many homeless people, being able to come off benefits through finding work was an attractive ideal that they were moving towards. But the realities of coming off benefits are extremely complicated, and can sometimes create a perverse incentive for people to stay out of work. Once people have come off benefits, the time delay for going back onto them can be considerable, making the decision to return to work an extremely risky one, with long-term consequences if unsuccessful. For people experiencing severe disadvantage, low confidence and a limited sense of their own agency, it creates a disincentive for returning to work. Many people experiencing mental health difficulties (which affect a high proportion of the homeless population), or recovering from a drug or alcohol addiction, are genuinely unsure about how well they will cope with work. Alongside the reconsideration of incapacity benefits, there should be a broader reappraisal of the support afforded to vulnerable adults, including those experiencing homelessness. Transition benefits should be introduced for the most vulnerable people moving away from welfare dependency, and the use of ‘probation periods’ should be rolled out more widely to allow people to try to work again,

without suffering penalties if their initial attempts prove unsuccessful.

Create coherence: thread together innovations in policy to create an accessible system

Policy aimed to draw marginalised adults back into work has seen a period of experimentation and innovation over the last ten years. While this willingness to explore new ideas partly underlies many recent successes in this area, it also means there has been a reasonably large number of pilots and small-scale schemes in different localities, as well as major changes nationally, such as the introduction of Jobcentre Plus. For people with high levels of mobility, such as those being moved around temporary accommodation, or those negotiating short-stay hostel places for a period of time, these variations can make the system very confusing. People delivering local services should develop strategies for increasing the transparency of their local system, including clear information about programmes that are likely to run only for a limited period and provide consistent points of contact within trusted organisations for people using their services.

Coping with risk: invest in support for employers

For employers, one of the key concerns in giving jobs to homeless people is dealing with the potentially increased level of risk in employing someone with a mixed track record. There is, however, potential for a combined effort from business and

the not-for-profit sector to work together to address the concerns. One possible solution would be a dedicated fund, initially endowed by several large donations from companies and then ‘topped up’ by contributions from companies benefiting from its impact. The fund could effectively act as insurance, paying out to companies that do suffer losses as a result of employing homeless people (which would be a minority of the whole, assuming reasonable levels of support for the people recruited), and offsetting the risk for those considering it in the future.

Adapt learning opportunities to reflect a different understanding of skills for employability

A broader view of the skills that people need for coping with work necessitates a different analysis of the sort of training that should be viewed as contributing to people becoming ‘work-ready’. Increasingly, people recognise that homeless people have at least some of the technical skills necessary for particular jobs, and employers often see specialist training as part of the offer they must make to employees. It is in the more generic skills necessary for operating in the workplace that some homeless people find the greatest difficulty; coping with a structured day, dealing with those in authority or resolving complaints or conflict when they arise. A period of homelessness can distort these life skills, making going back to work a taxing and frustrating experience. The sort of life skills development activity that combats these effects of long-term

severe disadvantage is as important for achieving employment as traditional vocational or academic learning. Policy-makers and funders should be prepared to break down the artificial barriers that separate formal, qualification-based training from equally important interventions focusing on less measurable skills, which often serve only to create an additional set of hurdles over which excluded people must climb before re-entering mainstream provision.

Notes

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