Keeping Work

Supporting homeless people to start, stay in, and thrive at work

A guide for employers
Introduction

For many homeless people, work is a central part of their journey away from homelessness. It can build self-esteem, enable financial independence and bring a sense of meaning and possibility to people’s lives.

Almost all homeless people want to work, but very few do. And those who do work can find it hard to sustain their jobs over the longer term.

Employers and managers can play a vital role in helping people make work part of their journey out of homelessness. This report highlights ways in which your organisation can help homeless people thrive at work. It is based on interviews we conducted with 50 homeless people over up to their first year in new jobs. We asked them how they were getting on both in and outside work, what was helping them to stay in work, and what was making it hard.

The people we interviewed had often been homeless and unemployed for many years. Half of them had been out of work for three years or more or had never worked, and 83% had slept rough in the past. They were entering a range of jobs, most commonly in catering, construction, caretaking and gardening, driving and office/clerical work, but other roles ranged from accountancy to football coaching and specialist engineering.

While the people interviewed had an experience of homelessness, homelessness does not happen in isolation and their other experiences and the challenges that they faced were wide ranging. Many of the findings would be applicable to those who face other barriers to work, for example having an unspent criminal conviction.

To read more detail about our participants’ experiences and our recommendations for employers, download our full research report from www.broadwaylondon.org or www.bitc.org.uk/keeping-work

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1 A survey of 300 homeless people by Off the Streets and into Work showed that 77% of them wanted to work now, and 97% wanted to work in the future (Singh, P (2005) No Home, No Job, Off the Streets and Into Work). Data from project steering group members shows that only between 2% and 14% of people living in their homelessness hostels and supporting housing worked in 2012.

2 See Business in the Community’s Ready for Work brochure.
Homeless people are strongly motivated to work and often deeply committed to their jobs. For them, work does not just pay the bills – it can bring a sense of meaning and purpose, increased confidence and self-worth, and can be a route into a new and better life.

The relationship with a line manager is of central importance to a person who is homeless as they move into work. The people in the study described a good line manager as being available, approachable and supportive. Good line managers were seen to adapt their style to suit the individual, and encourage them to learn and progress within the role.

Many homeless people are motivated by the chance to learn and develop at work. It is important that the organisation provides opportunities to develop skills and progress towards professional goals.

Homeless people do not need a lot of special support to stay in work. Many of the recommendations in this report might be described as simply good employment practice and will benefit a wide range of people: those who face barriers to employment; entry-level workers; and, often, all employees.

Moving into work can be a time of great change and challenge for homeless people. In addition to basic good practice, an understanding of the challenges that homeless people can face as they move into work, both in and outside work, can help managers and human resources teams support people to make a smooth transition.

Starting work can spark many changes in life outside work. These can include people moving from homelessness accommodation into privately rented or socially rented homes; managing the transition from benefits on to a salary and navigating a complex benefits system to secure in-work benefits; and leaving behind old support networks and building new relationships (or rebuilding old ones).

For some homeless people, adapting to working life is easy; others find it more challenging. Some people can struggle with low confidence and a lack of understanding of appropriate workplace behaviours. People need to learn new skills at work, build relationships with colleagues, and have the resilience to cope with problems and with making mistakes.

The research highlighted various organisational practices that can give homeless people the best chances of staying in work. These include paying a Living Wage; offering salary advances; offering work on permanent or temporary-to-permanent contracts; having appropriate HR policies and procedures; implementing buddy schemes; and working with specialist schemes such as Business in the Community’s Ready for Work programme to provide routes into employment for homeless and disadvantaged people.
Starting work after homelessness

The two tables show the types of issues that homeless people in the research reported dealing with as they moved into work.

**In work: tasks and challenges in the first few months of work**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>On gaining work</th>
<th>The first month in work</th>
<th>The next few months in work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Passing CRB check and references</strong></td>
<td><strong>Building confidence</strong></td>
<td><strong>Expanding skills and confidence</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This can be a source of anxiety and a stumbling block for some.</td>
<td>After a period of homelessness and unemployment, confidence can be very low. A new job can feel exciting but daunting.</td>
<td>With the right role and support, confidence is building. People are learning more tasks (including the ones they don’t like or find hard).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Deciding whether to accept the job</strong></td>
<td><strong>Creating a new routine</strong></td>
<td><strong>Probationary meetings and assessments</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing a ‘better off’ calculation and ensuring the job is financially viable.</td>
<td>Getting enough sleep and arriving at work on time.</td>
<td>People’s performance is being reviewed and this might affect their future in the role.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learning the role</strong></td>
<td><strong>Learning workplace behaviour</strong></td>
<td><strong>Building friendships with colleagues</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning new skills and technical terms. Making mistakes and learning from them. Many people put in extra, unpaid hours in order to prove themselves and do a good job.</td>
<td>Learning about workplace cultures, professional behaviour and how to interact with colleagues. Managing problems and following procedures.</td>
<td>Several people are building new friendships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learning workplace behaviour</strong></td>
<td><strong>Building relationships with colleagues</strong></td>
<td><strong>Dealing with difficulties</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Building relationships with colleagues</strong></td>
<td><strong>Thinking about the future</strong></td>
<td>For some people, difficulties become apparent. These can include difficulties with performance. Alternatively, some may feel that the role offers a lack of training, support or possibility for progress. Negotiations may have to take place with managers or others.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Including deciding how much personal information to disclose.</td>
<td>For others, skills are being recognised and the possibilities of promotions, permanent contracts or future work are being discussed.</td>
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# Outside work: tasks and challenges faced in the first few months of work

<table>
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</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Benefits</strong></td>
<td><strong>Managing an urgent financial crisis</strong></td>
<td><strong>Resolving benefits issues</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signing off Jobseeker’s Allowance or Employment and Support Allowance, informing Housing Benefits office, exploring entitlement to Working Tax Credit, back to work bonus and roll-on Housing Benefit. Navigating a complex system and securing accurate information and correct entitlements can be challenging.</td>
<td>People paid monthly (who must survive for up to six weeks with no income), or those who have not successfully secured the benefits to which they are entitled, are faced with an urgent financial crisis. This is most commonly dealt with by loans from support agencies, family or friends. They must negotiate with their housing provider if this results in rent arrears.</td>
<td>People who did not initially secure the benefits to which they were entitled may still be in discussions with benefits agencies to resolve this. For these people, rent arrears are building and they are experiencing stress and anxiety.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Financial management</strong></td>
<td><strong>Planning to move on</strong></td>
<td><strong>Financial management</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buying clothes for work and ensuring finances for travel. Seeking loans/support with these, where possible. Budgeting and financial management are required.</td>
<td>People living in hostels and supported housing often start to plan moving to independent tenancies quickly after starting full-time work because they can struggle to afford rents alongside other work-related outgoings such as travel, lunches and clothes. They must prepare themselves to move on and find appropriate and affordable housing.</td>
<td>The first monthly pay packet/the resolution of benefits issues can be the first clear idea of actual income for many people. Only now are financial management and budgeting more possible. Those who wish to move on are trying to save for rental deposits.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Managing an urgent financial crisis</strong></td>
<td><strong>Paying off loans and arrears</strong></td>
<td><strong>Dealing with tensions within accommodation</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Planning to move on</strong></td>
<td><strong>Rebuilding relationships with family</strong></td>
<td><strong>Moving on and away from support networks</strong></td>
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Support from line managers

The research showed where homeless people felt that managers had helped them in their first few weeks and months at work:

**Developing confidence.**
Many homeless people have low confidence, which can be exacerbated if they have been out of work for a long time. They might be nervous about asking for support. As people’s knowledge and skills grew, so did their confidence.

*Before, I was like, “What’s that?” but now I can do anything. People have talked about me saying I’m a quick learner and I’m a good grafter [...] I just get on with it, I know what to do now, I know everything I need to know on a building site.*

**Deciding how much to disclose about their background to colleagues and clients.**
Where the manager was aware of the employee’s background, it was important that they discussed how far the employee wanted to share this with colleagues and/or clients, and offered support with this. This is an individual decision that needs to be carefully considered.

**Matt’s story:**
**Flexible support from a manager**
Matt had to go to hospital for a serious health problem. He was off work for several weeks. When he realised he was ill and unable to work, he tried many times to telephone his manager, but she did not answer the phone and he did not want to leave a message or email about something so personal.

His manager called him to a meeting to discuss him failing to notify her of his sickness. He was very upset that she had followed such formal procedures instead of asking how he was. He felt that he was at risk of losing his job, and even offered his resignation.

At the meeting, they both explained their different approaches to communication and resolved the issue. She now has an open door policy for when he wishes to discuss an issue and he communicates by email or telephone more frequently.

He continues to receive excellent feedback from clients in his job, and they have discussed the possibility of a promotion.
Principles for line managers

Line managers can support employees by following these principles:

**Provide inductions and regular 1-1s**
Carry out regular supervision meetings with employees and make yourself as available as possible to your team. Offer comprehensive inductions for all new employees, ensuring that the individual is clear about what is expected of them in their new role, how their role fits into the organisation, and what they should be aiming to achieve in the first week, month and beyond. Introductions to new colleagues and information about important HR policies and procedures should also be provided. Sources of support should be outlined.

**Be proactive in offering support – don’t wait for people to ask**
People who are homeless often have very low confidence. They might be afraid to ask for support, either with day to day tasks, or with bigger issues. For example, one person we interviewed resigned because he was afraid to tell his manager that he was being bullied by a colleague.

"I didn’t feel I could talk to [my manager]. I wasn’t very confident so I was asking a lot of questions… The more you ask questions and feel they’re the wrong questions, the more unsure you get – it’s a vicious circle […] Now I ask the right questions at the right time."

Approachability and availability were key attributes valued by individuals:

"My manager is brilliant. She’s really supportive and she’s like a friend as well, she’ll have a laugh with us. It’s a good little network … If anything [comes up I don’t know how to deal with] I just ask, or if I’m unsure I just take it to my boss."

**Provide feedback and support people to learn from mistakes**
People said that they wanted positive feedback when they did something well. They also wanted constructive feedback when they made mistakes or could have done something better. Everyone was keen to learn and develop at work and receiving constructive feedback was an important part of this.

"Everything was new for me, I was nervous. The duty manager said to me “on my first day, I was nervous like you. We’ve got training for everything, don’t worry.” They gave me a lot of training about the workplace, how to deal with customers. It was good."

**Managing problems**
Problems at work (for example, with attendance or performance) can often be symptoms of problems outside work. It helps if employers can:

- Talk to the employee and find out what is wrong – don’t make assumptions.
- If possible, be flexible and offer time off if needed to resolve any problems (for example to resolve benefits issues, which can be time-consuming and stressful).
- Be clear with people about what is expected from them in terms of their behaviour, attendance and performance, and refer them to the appropriate policies and procedures.
- Inform people about sources of support within the organisation (for example, human resources and Employee Assistance Schemes).
The Centre for Research in Social Policy at Loughborough University sets the UK Living Wage, which is set at £7.45 per hour in 2013, and the Greater London Authority sets the London Living Wage, which is set at £8.55 per hour in 2013. This compares with the current minimum wage of £6.19 in 2013. See http://www.livingwage.org.uk/

**Organisational policies & practices**

The research highlighted some specific employment policies and practices that may support homeless people to stay in work. However, the authors recognise that they have commercial implications.

**Salary levels**
People who were on the national minimum wage often struggled greatly financially. They were unable to move off benefits and be financially independent. Organisations may consider paying a minimum salary of the Living Wage\(^3\) to address this.

**Offer flexible salary payment options**
Organisations can help employees manage during the difficult transition from benefits on to monthly pay by offering flexible salary payment options such as salary advances or weekly payments.

**Implement a buddy scheme**
Workplace buddies were seen as helpful to support people to learn about workplace behaviours. People felt able to be open with their buddies about challenges and struggles they were facing because they were outside their immediate team and they could help people begin to build a new peer network.

**Help homeless people to move into work**
Criminal records, gaps in experience and gaps in CVs can be barriers to moving into work for homeless people. Business in the Community’s Ready for Work programme helps people to overcome these barriers by offering them work placements, and, for many, routes into employment. Pret a Manger offers another way of supporting homeless people into work through its Simon Hargraves Apprenticeship Scheme for homeless people and ex-young offenders.

**Employ people on longer term contracts**
Temporary contracts ending is one of the biggest reasons that homeless people fall out of work. Where possible, organisations should offer roles on permanent or temporary-to-permanent contracts rather than short-term or zero-hour contracts which create particular challenges for homeless people around their benefits, accommodation and well-being.

**Charles’ story:**
**Support from a specialist scheme**
When Charles (in his 40s) left prison he decided he wanted to change his life. He had been homeless or vulnerably housed for 10 years.

He completed the Business in the Community Ready for Work programme, including a two week work placement doing administration within a large organisation. This helped his confidence grow, and not long after finishing the placement he successfully applied for a job as a laundry assistant within the organisation. He took the job to get back into the labour market and hoped it would help him move into a new job which made better use of his skills.

Charles was promoted to linen supervisor after only a few months. He enjoys using his organisational skills and managing a team. When he first started in the job he found it quite stressful. There was so much to do he could not switch off and found himself working longer and longer hours. He talked to his manager who said that he should not be regularly working extra unpaid hours and gave him advice about delegation. He followed her advice and work is now less stressful. He likes his manager and gets on well with his team.

Charles has aspirations to move into senior management. He has a job coach (through Ready for Work) who is a senior manager in another organisation, who is supporting and advising him about how he could achieve this.

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**Employers within the homelessness sector**

Seven of the people who took part in the research were employed within the homelessness sector. It was important that they were well-supported. Managers should remain aware of their potential vulnerability; inform people of sources of support; and discuss with the individual issues that may arise from working in the sector or organisation in which they were formerly a client, ensuring they have considered how they might deal with these. The issue of how far to disclose personal experiences of homelessness is a particular issue for people working in this sector.

**Support from outside work**

Support from outside work with employment-related issues can be helpful. People received useful support from job coaches and mentors, who helped people think about work-related goals and feel part of a professional world, and advisors within employment teams run by homelessness agencies.

Other sources of support available to homeless people with issues outside work can include Work Programme advisors (for those on the Work Programme), support workers such as hostel keyworkers, and peer support groups (such as Alcoholics Anonymous).

**Sarah’s story:**

**A successful move into work**

Sarah (in her 20s) had never worked. She had experienced domestic abuse and depression and had very low confidence when she started her job in retail.

The role was a traineeship which meant that she was gradually trained on different elements of the role over several months. This helped build up her confidence.

She was very nervous when she started the job. She made some small mistakes, finding it hard to learn to use the till, and once she interrupted her manager whilst he was speaking to a customer. However, she said that she learnt from her mistakes, kept trying and always tried to take a positive attitude towards things.

She is well liked and well supported both in work by her manager and colleagues, and outside work by friends and the support worker at her hostel.

At the end of the traineeship she had a formal assessment. She scored highly and was offered a permanent job.

After a few months in work, she moved to her own flat. She was working part-time but the chance to work regular overtime gave her more financial security and enabled her to buy furniture. She is making new friends and says her mental health has improved.
**Checklist**

**Helping homeless people sustain work**
Organisations which adopt the following practices give their homeless employees the best chances of staying in work.

### Support from line managers

| ✓ All new employees receive a comprehensive induction |
| ✓ Managers have regular 1-1s with their employees and make themselves as available as possible to their teams |
| ✓ Employees are supported to set professional goals and work towards them |
| ✓ Line managers have awareness of some of the particular issues that might crop up for a homeless person in their early days of employment – which might be evidenced by issues such as sickness or unexplained absence from the workplace |
| ✓ Where it is known that an employee has a background of homelessness, managers discuss with them whether they will disclose their background to colleagues and/or clients, and support them with this decision |

### Organisational policies and practices

| ✓ Employees are paid a Living Wage |
| ✓ Flexible salary payment options such as salary advances/weekly payments are available where needed |
| ✓ The organisation supports programmes that help people facing barriers to employment to move into work (for example, by working with Business in the Community’s Ready for Work programme) |
| ✓ There is a buddy scheme for new employees |
| ✓ Employment is offered on permanent or temporary-to-permanent contracts wherever possible |
| ✓ Flexible hours are possible where people need time off to resolve urgent benefits or housing issues |
| ✓ Employees returning to work after a period of unemployment have the opportunity to move from part-time to full-time work as their confidence and skills increase |
| ✓ Opportunities for learning and progression are built into the role and opportunities for professional training and development are offered |
| ✓ Policies and procedures are in place, adhered to and clearly outlined to employees, covering drug and alcohol use, attendance, conduct and performance, and bullying and harassment |
Starting and staying in work after homelessness
This research was conducted by Broadway’s specialist research team in partnership with Business in the Community.

The research was conducted and report written by Juliette Hough, Jane Jones and Becky Rice. Expert advice was provided by Nicola Inge and Rebecca Ford. Additional research was conducted by Hannah Silvester, Carina Ogle, Andrew Lonton and Richard Gaskin.

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About Broadway
Broadway is a London-based homelessness charity. Its vision is that every person finds and keeps a home. Each year it supports, challenges and inspires more than 9,000 people on their journey from street to home. It provides a full range of services to help people access accommodation, improve their physical and mental health, find training and employment, and live successful, independent lives.

About Broadway's research team
Broadway's Research and Information team specialises in producing research and statistics about rough sleeping and conducting in-depth research with vulnerable adults. The team has a reputation for producing high-quality homelessness research, winning the 2011 Charities Evaluation Service prize for Learning and Innovation and the 2008 British Educational Research Association award for Research into Practice. The team works with academic partners who ensure the quality and independence of the research, and takes an inclusive approach to research, involving and giving voice to participants.

About Business in the Community
Business in the Community (BITC) is a unique business movement committed to transforming business and transforming communities. It uses its unique position as the voice of responsible business to influence public policy and regularly conducts research to establish and promote responsible business best practice across a range of key social issues.

In addition to its research and campaigning activity, it also runs the national Ready for Work programme – a four-step programme that engages business to support disadvantaged groups, particularly people who have experienced homelessness, into employment. Ready for Work was born out of its Business Action on Homelessness (BAOH) campaign in 2001 and has supported more than 2,700 people into work.