

Keeping Work



Starting and keeping work when you're homeless:
Lessons and advice from people who have done it



Starting work when you're homeless

If you are living in a hostel or supported housing accommodation for homeless people and you are thinking about starting work, this booklet will help you learn from the experiences of other people who have done it.

We interviewed 50 homeless people who started work, to find out how they got on. We talked to them every few months, from the moment they got their job offer, and over the next six to 12 months.

Half of them had been out of work for more than three years. Eleven had been out of work for more than eight years or had never worked. They were aged 18-58, and went into a range of jobs, from catering and construction, to accountancy and engineering.

We wanted to find out:

- What's it like to work while you are homeless?
- What makes it hard to stay in work?
- What helps people stay in work?
- How can you have the best chance of getting a job and keeping it?

This report takes you through how you can get ready for work, start work and keep work, step by step. Everything in it is based on the experiences and advice of these 50 people who started work when they were homeless.

“**Everything is changed. I got this job, it changed my life. I feel something positive in my life. I tried my best and I did very well.**”



8 steps to starting and keeping work

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| 1 | Know why you want to work. This will help you stay motivated during difficult times |
| 2 | Managing any mental health, drug or alcohol problems Working can help improve your mental health – but make sure you have support if you need it. Working can also help reduce your substance use – but if you have a serious problem you might need to deal with that first. |
| 3 | Get some experience, build your confidence and get used to structure and routine Volunteering, work placements, training and getting qualifications can all help build your confidence, skills and experience. |
| 4 | Getting a job Get support, find out about specialist schemes and apprenticeships for people who are homeless, and decide what job you want to do. |
| 5 | Get informed Find out what in-work benefits and financial support you're entitled to, how much better off you'll be in work, what to expect from the job, and what working means for your housing. |
| 6 | Get support Make sure there's someone to support you with practical things, give you emotional support, and support you around your goals and learning at work. |
| 7 | Starting work Plan for your first day, expect to be nervous, and don't be afraid to ask questions. Find out what the working culture is like – how people behave in your workplace – and do the same. Decide how much to tell people about yourself and your past. |
| 8 | Keeping work Ask for help, develop a positive attitude, don't take on too much, and stay determined. Get support if you face problems. If you lose your job, keep on looking for work and do volunteering and courses. Work can help you to change your life for the better. |

Step 1

You know why you want to work

The reasons you might want to work might include:

More money and
A normal life moving off benefits
Pride & self-worth
**What does
work mean
to you?**
Better relationships
Contributing to society
Doing something useful
New things are possible

'I still feel proud to work. Knowing I'm going to get on the bus at 7 o'clock in the morning, I know that 99% of people on that bus are going to work as well. And it puts you in a different category. If people see you in a uniform they just tend to look at you a bit differently.'

'I don't feel like a bum no more. I felt like every Tom, Dick and Harry in the hostel. Working made me feel better about myself. I feel overjoyed.'

'I know now I have money in my account. I feel free. I'm going out. There's always something to do. I get up in the morning and go to work. It's like you're your own self. I'm happy.'

These are the main reasons that the 50 people we interviewed gave for wanting to work. For them, moving into work could mean:

- More money.
- Moving on into their own home.
- New friendships and relationships.
- Moving forwards in life.

It's important to be realistic about the good things working will bring, and what will be hard: it sometimes takes time to make positive changes.

Knowing why you want to work will help keep you motivated and focused, and help you through any difficult times.

Managing any mental health, drug or alcohol problems

Step 2

Work and your mental health

Having a mental health problem does not necessarily mean that you can't work. Two thirds of the people we talked to had a mental health problem now or in the past, most often depression or anxiety. Many of them said that working made their mental health better.

But the issues some people faced when they moved into work sometimes put a strain on their mental health. People said it was important that you can manage your mental health, know how to recognise signs that there is something wrong, and know where to go for support if things get worse.

Work and drugs or alcohol

Some people we talked to said that working helped them reduce their drug or alcohol use, or helped them stay abstinent. But two people who had serious drug or alcohol problems both lost their jobs because of their substance use. It was affecting their behaviour at work, they could not concentrate, and they were doing things that were not safe.

If alcohol or drugs are a serious problem for you, you might still be able to work, and working might reduce them for now. But at some point you will almost certainly have to address these issues or they will interfere with your work. When you're working it can also be hard to find time to keep up treatment, go to AA or NA meetings, or go for other support, and if you

face difficulties in or outside work you can be at risk of relapse. Make sure you get support before this happens.

Taking time

It is important to take the time you need to recover from what you've been through.

“In terms of support getting back to work, the most important thing I've had is time, and my recovery. That prepares me for everything, so that I can deal with things as they come along.”



Step 3

Getting some experience, building your confidence, and getting used to structure and routine

If you haven't got experience in your chosen line of work, volunteering and work placements can help you build up your skills and learn what is expected at work. They can help you try out different jobs and find out what you enjoy. Even if you have got experience, they can help you build networks, get used to structure and routine, fill the gaps in your CV and increase your confidence and self-esteem.

“When I turned up to the [training course] I was very anxious, frightened even. Self-conscious, am I doing the right thing? Until I did that work placement, I genuinely didn't know if I was capable of getting up and going out every day. So that was a really good experience.”

Several of the people we interviewed had done volunteering or work placements (for example through the Ready for Work programme) and then been offered a paid job with the same organisation:

“[After two weeks, my manager] came up to me and said “come back on Monday at 8 o'clock”. So I said “have I got a job?” and he said “yes”. I couldn't believe it.”

Training and getting qualifications can also help you build your skills and confidence and prove you can do the job.

Ask about the Get Ready and Ready for Work programmes run in some places by Business in the Community, and find out if there are any other specialist training courses in your area. Getting involved with a TimeBank can be a way of volunteering in bite-size chunks.

Sarah's story: **This job changed my life**

Sarah is in her 20s and she had never worked. She had left an abusive home, and had depression and very low confidence when she started her job in a department store.

'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.'

'I was there for work experience for two weeks, then afterwards the duty manager offered me a job.'

'This is my first time working. It's great for me and I'm pleased. I didn't expect that I'd get this job.'

It was not always easy for Sarah. She still found it hard to deal with the bad memories from her past. She also made some mistakes at work, and was very hard on herself about these.

'I made one big mistake [when I interrupted a store manager]. He said "I'm dealing with a customer" and I said "sorry". I felt guilty.'

'But behind the mistake you learn something, and I'm happy that I've learnt that. Positive attitude is the most important thing. Some people go "I can't do this, I can't be bothered doing this". I go: "I don't like this but I have to do this at the moment. I need to learn."'

At the end of her traineeship, Sarah was offered a permanent job. She has moved out



of her hostel into a housing association flat and has made some new friends. She can afford to buy make up and nice clothes. She feels much more confident and says that working has helped her feel happier.

'Everything is changed. I got this job, it changed my life. I feel something positive in my life. I tried my best and I did very well.'

Step 4

Getting a job

Get support

Find out if your homelessness agency has a special Employment Team, and if they do, ask if they can support you with looking for jobs, writing application forms and CVs and learning interview skills. You can also ask for support from your key worker, your Work Programme advisor (if you're on the Work Programme) or your advisor at Jobcentre Plus. Make sure your Jobseeker's Agreement is realistic, and try to build a good relationship with your Jobcentre Plus advisor.

Ask someone to read your job applications and make suggestions about how to improve them, and to help you prepare for job interviews.

“Don't give up. Access all the things you can, do every course you can. Tap into training and employment people [advisors].”

Find out about specialist schemes and apprenticeships for homeless people

Some examples of specialist apprenticeships are Beyond Food apprenticeships in catering and Building Lives apprenticeships in construction (both in London – things change so check this information is up to date). Pret a Manger cafes also run an apprenticeship scheme for homeless people and ex-young offenders. Find out if there are any other apprenticeships, social enterprises or into-work schemes in your area.

Ready for Work (see Step 3) can also help you move into work – people who do well in their work placements are sometimes offered jobs in the organisation.

Do you want 'any job' or a 'better job'?

Some people say that if you start working in 'any job' it can make it much easier to move to a 'better job' – the job you really want to do. People can progress like this:

Any job > better job > career

Do you want to move into 'any job' or try to move straight into a 'better job'?

Five of the people we interviewed started working in a job they didn't want to do long term. But they used their experience to move into a new 'better' job. They said that moving into 'any job' can increase your confidence and help you get used to working.

Felix's story: **Moving into a better job**

Felix was using drugs and going in and out of prison for 20 years. When he left prison a year ago, he did some courses and volunteering and then started working in a minimum wage job:

'It's not glamorous. I can be cleaning toilets that are full of whatever. It can be nasty work.'

'But I'm just grateful I have a job. I can take my children out. I can pay my bills. My family; seeing the members of my family again. I've got a sense of self-worth, I'm part of a team.'

'This isn't what I want to be doing all my life – it's just a stepping stone – I've got plans [...] But that's gonna take a little bit of time so I'm heading in the direction.'

'So I'm coming in on time, doing my job, not causing any aggro, getting on with the team. I'm showing that I'm able to add those little qualities. And hopefully that will serve me in good stead for an opportunity in the future. If not, I'll look elsewhere. But then I'll have references.'

After six months, Felix applied for the job he wanted to be doing, as a support worker for vulnerable people, and got the job:

'If I wouldn't have got that kind of work [my first job], then there wouldn't be anywhere for me to move forward to... It gave me the confidence to apply for other jobs; it showed me that I could hold a job down again.'



Step 5

Getting informed

If you want to have control over your life and your job, and to avoid surprises and problems, you need to get information.

What in-work benefits are you entitled to?

Find out what benefits you are entitled to – check with Jobcentre Plus or your support worker or employment advisor, or look on www.turn2us.org.uk or www.gov.uk/benefits-adviser. Put in your applications as soon as you start work – and if you don't hear anything within three weeks, then chase them up. If you have problems getting benefits, then get support.

How much better off will you be in work?

Do a 'better off in work' calculation (ask the Work Programme, Jobcentre Plus or your support agency). Remember to consider: does this take into account travel expenses, buying lunch, paying off debts? How much will you need to earn? Work out how to budget with your money over the week or month. Crisis provides a helpful online calculator you can use: www.crisis.org.uk/pages/into-work-comprehensive.html

What financial support are you entitled to?

If you are on the Work Programme, they should be able to help you with travel costs for the first month, buying clothes for work, and maybe with vouchers for food. If not, see if Jobcentre Plus or the homelessness agency which supports you can help.

“ **Get the full information and ask as many people as you can, because different people tell you different things** ”

If you have a disability, health or mental health condition, and need practical support to do your job (like specialist equipment) you might also be able to apply for an Access to Work grant from the government.

Do you know what to expect from the job?

- How much is your salary or wage?
- What is your job title and what are your duties?
- Are you on a temporary or permanent contract? If it's a temporary contract, what happens after it ends – is there a chance of it being extended?
- If it's an apprenticeship, what are your chances of getting permanent employment after it finishes?
- Will you need support at work to develop any extra skills or experience to do the job?

What does working mean for your housing?

What independent housing will you be able to afford on the wage you can expect? How will working affect what you have to pay towards your hostel or support housing accommodation?

Make sure you have support! People who have support after they've started work find it much easier to stay in work – the more people there are to support you, the better. Check if you have support in these three areas – and if you don't, see if you can fill the gaps.

1. Practical support

What? Someone to give you advice, advocacy and support around benefits, money management, accommodation, move-on, mental health and substance use.

Who? Your support worker, employment advisor, Work Programme advisor or Jobcentre Plus advisor can help with different types of support.

✓ I have this support from:

✓ I might need extra support. I could get this from:.....

2. Emotional and personal support

What? Someone to ask how you are; someone to listen; someone to go to in a crisis. Someone who can support you to set life goals, work towards them, and reflect on how far you've come.

Who? Your support worker, employment advisor, Work Programme advisor or mental health/ drug or alcohol worker. Perhaps your colleagues and manager. Check if your employer has an Employee Assistance Programme (which offers confidential counselling and support). Peer support groups (like AA or NA) can be very supportive. So can family and friends, and job coaches, buddies and mentors.

✓ I have this support from:

✓ I might need extra support. I could get this from:.....

3. Professional support

What? Someone to support you to set career goals and work towards them, and to learn and develop your skills at work.

Who? Your manager, a job coach or mentor, your employment advisor, your Work Programme advisor.

✓ I have this support from:

✓ I might need extra support. I could get this from:.....

Step 7

Starting work

Your first day

Be early! Get a map, plan your route, and plan what you'll wear in advance. Several of the people we talked to said it took longer to get there than they expected and they were late.

Expect to be nervous, and expect to feel like you don't know what you're doing.

“**The hardest thing is to start. It's a new environment, new people, new things. The first couple of weeks, I didn't know what I was doing. It was like: “where do I put this, what do I do with that, how do I use this?” But after the first month, I was showing new staff around**”

Don't be afraid to ask questions:

“**If you don't know something, ask someone**”

Learning how to behave in the workplace

Each workplace has different ways that people behave, and if you haven't worked for a while it can be hard to know what these are. Watch, listen and talk to your workmates to find out what is normal in the workplace.

"I'm still quite baffled by a lot of things in the world of work: relationships, email. I don't quite know how to conduct myself."

“**Do things according to procedure, come in on time, be a hard worker and team player, prove to the company and your manager that you're capable and reliable**”

Understanding the jargon at work (special or technical words) can be difficult at first, but the people we interviewed said that they asked questions and learnt this over time.

Decide how much to tell people about yourself and your past

How much do you want your colleagues to know about your past or your life outside work? What about your boss? How do you think they might respond if you tell them you've been in prison, or out of work for a long time, or are homeless?

Different people had different views about this, so it is a decision that everyone should think carefully about. Some people found that it helped to discuss the decision with their manager (when they know their background), or their support worker or job coach.

Some people told their workmates about their background and then regretted it:

'One of the guys said to me "Have you ever worked?" and I said "no" and he started laughing so I said, "Why is that funny?'

“They are completely different people from people I'm used to and I've had to adjust to that. It's hard.”

Others felt confident enough to say that their background did not matter:

“Every time you start a new job, you're walking in thinking, "What do they think of me?"

'I'm quite brazen. I won't hide the fact I went to jail, or my crime. I think, "This is where I come from, this is who I am". And 99% of the time people look at me and go "That doesn't matter". It might be my line of work, it's quite blokey. I'm just me; people take me as I am.'

If people were working in the homelessness sector, they often saw their background as an advantage which helped them do their job better – but they often still didn't tell all of their colleagues or clients.

When we talked to businesses about our research, they said that if someone is having problems outside work which are interfering with their work, it could be helpful to tell their manager. This means that they will understand more and can give you better support.

Step 8

Keeping work

The main advice that people gave about how to do well in work is:

1. Ask for help!

Don't wait until things get really bad before you ask for help. Talk things over and ask for support when you need it. If it's to do with work, you could talk to your manager, the human resources team or a 'buddy' if you have one. Alternatively, get advice from someone outside work like your support worker. If it's to do with something outside work, talk to someone outside work if you can; if you have a good relationship with your manager you could also talk to them.

“ I phone my sponsor up and say “I am off, I'm not doing this job”, and he kind of talks to me and we look at it differently and then I just get on with it. ”

2. Develop a 'positive attitude'

Stay positive even when you are facing challenges or have made a mistake and try to make things better.



“ **Positive attitude is the most important thing. Some people go “I can't do this, I can't be bothered doing this”. I go: “I don't like this but I have to do this at the moment. I need to learn.** ”

3. Don't take on too much

Now you've got a job you might feel like you can do anything, but be careful you don't take on more than you can cope with.

4. Stay determined and remember why you are doing this job

“ **Hang in there - it gets better. If you've got a goal just stick to it no matter what anyone says.** ”

Dealing with problems

1. Problems with benefits and money

This was one of the biggest problems people could face. This includes: getting the benefits you're entitled to; coping financially before you get your first pay; budgeting with a monthly salary; and dealing with rent arrears. This is especially hard if you work different hours every week:

'For the first month in work I thought, I have so much debt and I've only just started work, it was a constant worry'.

It is important to be organised, apply for benefits as soon as possible, chase them up, and get support if you're having problems:

'Keep on applying and nagging people for things if they don't want to give them to you'.

2. Problems with other residents where you live

Starting work can make you more vulnerable to bullying, like people asking you for money, or expecting you to pay more than your share for bills. Work out how you will deal with this if it happens and talk to your support worker if you can:

'Living in a hostel is killing me. Because everyone knows I'm working, everyone is asking me: "have you got a roll up, have you got credit, have you got this, have you got that..."'

3. Problems with your mental health or substance use

Stay aware of how you are coping, and ask for help if you need it. Make sure you do things that are good for your well-being: this could include sport, eating healthily, massage and other things you enjoy doing.

'Last week it was stressful – I had thoughts about drinking. I felt a bit vulnerable because of the new situation. I feel fine now. I know I can be referred to a psychologist if I need to be'.

4. Problems at work

If you're struggling, tell someone – if not your manager, then someone else:

“ [My colleague] had a problem with me. He just talked to me like I'm an idiot. He used to talk badly about me behind my back. My anxiety came back and I left the job. I wish I would've spoken up [and told my manager] ”

Neil's story: Sticking with it

Neil (in his 40s) had never worked. He was only a few months clean when he got his job as a labourer on a building site.

Neil's first few months in work..

At first Neil struggled with some things about the job:

'I'm finding it a bit challenging sometimes, because I'm not used to it. I've never been on the sites, the people I'm working with have been doing it for years, they know what they're doing. They will come out with mad words I've never heard of and I'm like "what's that?" and I feel dumb.

'I find it hard to approach [my boss]. Sometimes I'll say "hello" and he'll just ignore me. I'll be like a scared rat because he's my boss and he's dead straight headed. I don't feel I know what I'm doing sometimes and I'm scared to ask.

'Some days I want to give up [and leave the job, but] I don't want to let myself down... Life is a lot better [now]. My family are helping me out now, everyone is proud of me. A lot has changed.'

Nine months later...

By his final interview nine months later, Neil was still doing the job and had moved into his own home. He was confident that he had the knowledge and skills he needed to do



the job well. He now realises that his boss's behaviour wasn't personal, and he thinks it was just the culture of building sites.

'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.'

Neil's advice

'Stick with it, don't let anything get you down. Think how good your life is now, compared with what it was. You won't regret it, it's the biggest chance of your life.'

Losing work and finding your next job

You might find that you move in and out of different jobs to begin with, while you are trying to get a permanent job. 22 of the 50 people we interviewed lost their first jobs – most often because their temporary or casual work ended, but five people were asked to leave their jobs and three people walked out.

You might feel disheartened, disappointed and frustrated if you lose your job:

'The biggest support you have got is yourself. I think you have to have motivation and desire. The problem is when you put yourself out all the time and you keep getting rejected and told there is no work. You become despondent. I sit there and think: "I have done everything I can. This isn't my fault".'

But moving into work can still be a good experience, even if your job ends. The people we interviewed said that it gave them more experience of working and improved their confidence.

“I'm more confident, I can go and face any job now.”

Keep looking for work, and take the opportunity to do voluntary work and a course to get more experience. If you're being supported by an employment team in a homelessness agency, see if they can help you get a mentor.

“I do a lot of applications every week. I'm volunteering at [a charity]. It keeps me busy, it's something on my CV. I'm enjoying it, I like helping.”

This should help you get another job. When we finished doing the research eight people who lost their jobs had started new jobs.

'I always make sure I'm clean, tidy, presentable, on time. [My colleagues] said to the agency "If we need anyone again, can we have Joe again". It's the networking aspect. I got the warehouse job on the back of that.'

Changing lives

If you follow the steps in this booklet, stay positive and determined, and ask for support when you need it, moving into work might help you change your life for the better.

We stayed in touch with 34 of the 50 people we interviewed for six months to one year after they started their jobs. Of those 34 people, 22 (two thirds) were still working when we finished the research.

Five people moved straight from their first job into a new, better job.

15 people moved from hostels or supported housing into their own homes during the research. As far as we know, no one went back to sleeping rough.

Several people had built better relationships with their families. Many had new friendships (often with colleagues) and several had started new romantic relationships.

'My family is helping me out now, everyone is proud of me [...] My brother's helping me out, I haven't seen him in a couple of years.'

'It's definitely had an effect on my self-esteem and confidence ... Suddenly I'm really popular with women! ... People have responded to me differently since I've been working ... I feel better and I think people pick up on that.'

Many people said their confidence had increased and they were making plans for the future:

“ I've got a lot more confidence in myself, I believe in myself a bit more now. And I know that by setting my goals, I can reach them ”

Many people said that working had changed their lives for the better:

“ Grab it, grab the chance! When you get given that chance, do everything for it, because it's a better life. The possibilities in going from the street to work are endless. ”

Jason's advice

Jason (in his 30s) was homeless, using drugs and in trouble with the police for all his adult life. He did a training course which taught people who were homeless how to do building work. He enjoyed it and started volunteering at the organisation. After six months, he got a job as a teacher on the same course he had done as a student. This is his advice:

'If you're struggling don't be afraid to ask people, speak about your problems.'

'Just enjoy yourself really. You've got a job, that's a big massive step, you know that really you're on the right tracks.'

'Don't run before you can walk. Just because you've got a job don't think "oh right, that's everything sorted". It may not be. Some people I know have taken on a lot of stuff and then they can't cope, and the only way they know how to cope is to go back to the drink, and then it's game over really.'

'Try and take it slow and see how you're feeling, don't be afraid to say "this is too much, a little bit too much at the moment" – not saying that you don't want to do it, but just slow it down a little bit.'



'Before, I'd always say yes all the time, "yeah I'll do that, I'll do this", and I weren't happy with it cos I weren't doing it for myself, I was just doing it to please people. Now I will say "no, I'm not having it" or "I've got a lot on at the minute, maybe later on". It needs confidence to say that.'

'Just do it with little steps really, learning.'

Keeping Work: 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. Additional research was conducted by Hannah Silvester, Carina Ogle, Andrew Lonton and Richard Gaskin.

Guides for support workers and employers

For guides for support providers and employers and the full research report, visit www.broadwaylondon.org or contact Broadway's Research Team at research@broadwaylondon.org.

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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.



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