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Welfare Conditionality
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No strings attached?

An exploration of employment support services offered by third sector homelessness organisations

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Homelessness, work & welfare

- Moving into the paid labour market has been presented as a key part of the 'solution' to homelessness
- Very high levels and long histories of unemployment and inactivity amongst homeless service users (Hough et al 2013; McNaughton, 2008; FEANTSA, 2007; Homeless Link, 2013).
- Combination of factors can make entering and sustaining work a significant challenge (Buckingham, 2010; FEANTSA, 2007).
- Those experiencing homelessness are increasingly expected to look for and move into work, as part of an increasingly conditional welfare system (Dwyer, 2004; Johnsen et al, 2014, Watts et al, 2014).
- Failure to demonstrate a willingness to move into employment leaves homeless people vulnerable to having their entitlements to out-of-work benefits withdrawn (Johnsen et al, 2014; Batty et al, 2015).
- Many homeless people have become alienated from mainstream employment support provided by Job Centre Plus and the Work Programme (Crisis, Homeless Link and St Mungo's, 2012; Johnsen et al, 2016).

An alternative? Third sector support for homeless jobseekers

- Homelessness sector has been generally supportive of the need to support homeless people to move into (or at least closer to) work.
- 50 per cent of day centres directly provide 'employment, training and education' activities in-house, 70 per cent provide 'meaningful activities' (Homeless Link, 2015).
- High profile examples, e.g. Crisis 'skylight' centres, and social enterprises (e.g. Emmaus, Big Issue)
- Third sector role recognised as having an important role in helping homeless adults to develop skills and access employment (Places of Change, STRIVE (Skills, Training, Innovation and Employment pre-employment pilots), Work Club Programme (Crisp, 2015))

Conditionality in homelessness services

- Trend towards increased expectations held by homelessness agencies that homeless people engage with the supportive interventions they are offering (Johnsen et al, 2014).
- A ‘tough love’ approach has accompanied improvements in service provision for rough sleepers, with an expectation that they would ‘come inside’ and actively engage with the support and services available to them (Fitzpatrick and Jones, 2005; Dobson, 2011; Whiteford, 2010).
- Conversely, also a growing interest in more relaxed approaches in providing support to this group (‘personalisation’ agenda) (see for example Brown, 2013; Hough and Rice, 2010; Teixeira, 2010).
- Is employment-related support on offer in these settings subject to behavioural expectations?

A study of the Greater Manchester homelessness sector

- Empirical study investigating the education, training and employment support offered by third sector organisations supporting homeless adults (welfare conditionality was not a key focus)
- 27 semi-structured qualitative interviews with staff working across 12 third sector homelessness organisations
- Based in Greater Manchester, a large metropolitan county in the North West of England, consisting of ten metropolitan boroughs.
- Sample comprises workers from organisations of different types and sizes, including accommodation projects, activity centres and social enterprises.
- Respondents worked in different roles (including support/project workers, volunteer coordinators, and chief executives) at a range of levels ('operational', 'managerial', 'strategic').
- Face-to-face interviews conducted August - November 2015

Extent and types of employment and skills provision

- Wide range of employment and training opportunities, including opportunities to:
 - gain new vocational skills through work experience and volunteering,
 - develop digital and budgeting skills,
 - access support with job applications and CVs
 - access support to improve literacy and numeracy skills,
 - learn about and manage changes in the social security system,
 - participate in a range of 'meaningful activities' including creative writing groups, gardening, arts and cooking classes
- A small number of organisations directly offered employment opportunities
- Support was provided alongside other interventions
- Activities were developed in response to their service users' needs and aspirations, building on their existing skills and achievements.
- Activities varied in formality, supported by mix of external providers, in-house staff, volunteers.

The value of alternative support to homeless jobseekers: a practitioner's view

- *[The Job Centre is] not person-centred, it's not thinking about their individual needs, it's not thinking about their journey. It's not thinking about their aspirations. It's not thinking about anything. It's just trying to get somebody off benefit, and I'm not sure that's the solution. (Managerial level worker, Activity Centre)*
- *[S]o many of our clients have been through various training, this and that... and job clubs and 'You will go back to work' and 'this is how to do a CV', and nothing's worked for them (Managerial level worker, Activity Centre)*
- *We'll do [CVs and help with job search] with them, even though they have an advisor [at the Job Centre]. That advisor won't do it with them (Operational level worker, Activity Centre)*

The value of alternative support to homeless jobseekers: a practitioner's view

- *You don't go to the Job Centre to get a job. You go to the Job Centre for someone to become a buggerance in your life and make life more difficult, not to help you (Strategic level worker, Residential Project and Social Enterprise)*
- *The fact that there are no conditions... I think they love it and they respect it more (Operational level worker, Activity Centre)*
- *It's them who want to engage with us. It's not sort of the other way round like it is with the Job Centre and the housing and probation and all those other services where people have to statutorily go along. The people who walk through our door choose to walk through our door and choose to access our service. (Strategic level worker, Activity Centre)*

Unintended consequences? The impact of conditionality on homelessness services

- *[We spend a lot of time] checking that they've been to appointments.... So if they have got appointments with say the Job Centre or... sometimes the Job Centre will put our residents on courses, and work placements that they need to attend - so making sure that they're up for that and that we're actively encouraging that routine and that they're going there. (Operational level worker, Residential Project)*
- *Nine times out of ten we would manipulate our training around what they need to do for [the Job Centre] because it's not as flexible for them to change what they need to change. And then they run the risk of them being sanctioned, which would be horrific. (Operational level worker, Residential Project)*

- *There's an element of crisis work that has become a priority at times.... The number of people in situations where they've been going for week after week without money. And we're working with people who we are trying to support in those circumstances (Operational level worker, Activity Centre)*
- *It can kind of hamper someone's outlook ... and their hope for what they can achieve if they're being hit by sanctions or if just money issues are a real worry or if debt is increasing because of those issues and that's more of a challenge for how stable they are and how positive their outlook is which can affect how well they engage in the project and how much they are looking ahead... to what their potential is (Managerial level worker, Activity Centre and Social Enterprise)*

No strings attached? Conditionality *in* homelessness services

- *[I]f you don't think about it... mandated volunteering is a bad thing, it's terrible. And if you're of a certain social inclination you wouldn't want to align yourself with forcing people to volunteer. (Operational level worker, Activity Centre)*
- *Sometimes people turn up and they didn't really want to be there.... [but] 80 per cent of the people who come and do a mandatory placement stay on afterwards.... some of them are still volunteering now. Because people like it... people feel like they've found somewhere where they can start to develop themselves rather than somebody else telling them this is where they need to go and this is what they need to do to get there (Operational level worker, Activity Centre)*
- *I can only remember... one occasion where I've been asked to... had occasion to discuss the behaviour of a mandated person... they were a difficult person. And the outcome for them wasn't brilliant. (Strategic level worker, Activity Centre)*

No strings attached? Conditionality *in homelessness services*

- *You signed up to work with us as part of your tenancy agreement, if you weren't to pay your rent, answer your door to the landlord or whatever in a private tenancy agreement, what would happen? (Operational level worker, Residential Project)*
- *Everybody who comes to our service has to agree to do a minimum of 12 hours a week voluntary work. So what we don't want is people just coming here sitting around doing nothing because that's not productive for anyone. (Strategic level worker, Residential Project)*
- *Generally, if you take the devil's coin, you dance the devil's tune. Supporting People money for example, if you take the Supporting People money then you have to do the Supporting People audit, tick all their boxes, fill in their pro formas... and do all their stuff. We won't do that (Strategic level worker, Residential Project and Social Enterprise)*

Conclusions: Welfare conditionality and homeless jobseekers

- Mainstream welfare system is failing to provide security and support for homeless people
- Important role for non-conditional support to help homeless people to make the first steps towards work
- Government should take steps to better support non-mandatory support in homelessness and other community settings.

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