**Supporting homeless people into work:** recommendations for the future of Government-led employment support

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**This paper has been produced in partnership by**

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**Supporting homeless people into work:** recommendations for the DWP’s proposed Work and Health Programme

Tens of thousands of people become homeless every year[[1]](#footnote-1). Many thousands more are at risk of homelessness, live in temporary and supported accommodation or face unstable living arrangements[[2]](#footnote-2). Homelessness includes, but is not limited to, people living in hostels, supported housing projects, shelters or refuges, as well as those sleeping on friends’ or family’s floors, squatting or living in Temporary Accommodation.

The lack of a stable and settled home makes it extremely difficult for individuals to find and maintain employment. The percentage of homeless people in work varies; only eight per cent of St Mungo’s clients are in work[[3]](#footnote-3) whilst just two per cent of Crisis’ clients are in full time work and five per cent are in part time work[[4]](#footnote-4). However, a recent report by Crisis identified an overwhelming motivation to work amongst homeless people and those at risk of homelessness, despite them having high support needs (88 per cent of all survey respondents said they wanted a job now or in the future[[5]](#footnote-5)).

Homelessness can create or exacerbate a broad range of other issues which act as a barrier to employment. Poor mental and physical health is common amongst homeless people; seventy-three per cent of homeless people report physical health problems and 80 per cent report some form of mental health condition.[[6]](#footnote-6) Other barriers include substance misuse, learning difficulties, lack of basic skills, offending and being a victim of violent crime.

In the future, provision commissioned by the DWP, such as the Work and Health Programme launching in 2017, will focus primarily on customers with disabilities and health conditions; however it is clear that, alongside health conditions, homeless people often face equivalent barriers to employment and require significant, intensive and well-structured support. If homeless people are not offered support that meets their needs, their issues can become further entrenched, which incurs not only a personal cost to those individuals, but ultimately a financial cost to the Government purse.

By intervening early and providing the right employment support at the right time, we believe that many more people who have experienced homelessness or housing issues can move into work.

**Overview: Realising the opportunity now**

ERSA, the representative body for the employment support sector, and five organisations specialising in delivering homelessness support, Crisis, St Mungo’s, The Salvation Army, Centrpoint and Homeless Link, are calling on the Government to help some of society’s most vulnerable people into work. The recommendations outlined in this paper present a real opportunity to change the lives of homeless people through the design and delivery of more targeted support.

Drawing on the expertise from within the homelessness and employment sector, we set out recommendations for Government outlining how future provision could enable more people with acute housing needs to find and sustain employment and help curb further rises in homelessness. The recommendations focus on integrating support for tackling homelessness into employment support, which will require vital improvements to the assessment process, programme design and conditionality regime; namely:

* Jobcentre Plus identifying those who are homeless and vulnerably housed at day one of their benefit claim (or soon after);
* Fast track provision to specialist support, which tends to be best provided by homelessness experts;
* Tailoring/suspension of the conditionality regime to ensure that jobseekers with housing needs are supported to deal with their barriers to work, rather than (inadvertently) penalised for them.

If adopted across all support services, these could make a significant impact to the success of employment programmes and the lives of homeless people in the future.

**Improving the identification of jobseekers who are homeless or at risk of homelessness**

It is widely recognised within the sector and amongst government officials that the assessment process is critical to ensuring jobseekers receive the most appropriate support to meet their needs. Research by Homeless Link, Crisis and St Mungo’s found that Jobcentre Plus does not always identify people as homeless or vulnerably housed at their initial assessment when they open a benefit claim[[7]](#footnote-7). This can result in low levels of jobseeker engagement, meaning that support needs can escalate quickly if not addressed. In order to make the system work for homeless people, we recommend the following:

* Homelessness should be incorporated into an official assessment framework, used by Jobcentre Plus, and incorporated into guidance for employment support providers that deliver their own assessment. This must identify an individual’s support needs in relation to housing, as well as their employability and capability to work.
* Homelessness should be detected via the assessment process on day one of an individual’s claim so that housing needs are addressed as quickly as possible and homelessness is prevented. Regular reviews and an effective feedback loop to update the initial assessment findings should also include housing as people’s support needs change over time. Such changes in circumstances should be reflected in the pricing structures of the employment support provided.
* The assessment criteria should reflect all forms of homelessness, not just rough sleeping. This includes people living in hostels, supported housing projects, shelters or refuges, as well as those sleeping on friends’ or family’s floors, squatting or living in Temporary Accommodation. Assessments should also recognise that people at risk of losing their accommodation may also face significant obstacles to gaining employment and may require specialist housing support.
* Assessors should undertake specific training in order to develop the skills needed to identify housing support requirements. Not all jobseekers are able or willing to reveal their housing situation and many may not self-identify as homeless if they are not sleeping rough. People may also be reluctant to disclose their situation due to the stigma associated with homelessness and a lack of trust in officials.
* Guidance on assessing housing needs should be issued to all assessors. Former and current clients of homelessness services should be given the opportunity to feed into the drafting of this guidance. It should emphasise that certain groups are more likely to be homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, including care leavers, ex-offenders, refugees or those with physical and mental health conditions, and that assessors should build a secure and trusting relationship to help identify such support needs.
* Once assessed, individuals who are identified as homeless or vulnerably housed should have the option to volunteer to be fast tracked to specialist employment support provision, since the level of support that Jobcentre Plus tends to be able to deliver is highly unlikely to be sufficient for the support needs of this group. Such specialist employment provision is likely to be best provided by homelessness experts, who are then able to cross refer to other types of provision, such as support with mental health problems and drug and alcohol use, as well as working to improve an individual’s housing situation.
* As plans stand, future DWP provision is unlikely to specifically serve the needs of jobseekers who are homeless or vulnerably housed. From 2017, the Government’s intention is that jobseekers without disabilities or health conditions who are on Jobseekers Allowance, or equivalent under Universal Credit, will be supported by Jobcentre Plus for up to two years before referral to the new Work and Health Programme. The first three months of a claim will require weekly signing at Jobcentre Plus, with the potential for daily signing requirements for some jobseekers.
* Some Jobcentre Plus advisers will be dedicated to helping vulnerable jobseekers and will go the extra mile to support those who are homeless, whilst some individual jobcentres may commission additional provision under the Flexible Support Fund. However, there is concern that the overall Jobcentre Plus regime is unlikely to be able to provide the level of support necessary for some individuals. One solution could be to offer voluntary access to the new Work and Health Programme to homeless jobseekers from Day 1 of a benefits claim, with homelessness providers contracted to provide support within that programme.

**The Work and Health Programme should focus on housing needs as well as disabilities and health conditions**

The most recent evaluation of mainstream employment provision for the long term unemployed suggests that stable housing can underpin (re)entry into work[[8]](#footnote-8). In order to start seeing an improvement in employment levels amongst homeless groups, employment and housing support services need to be better aligned and integrated. Employment support can be a useful part of provision focused on tackling homelessness whilst, in turn, housing support should be offered to those who need it as part of any employment support programme.

In order to increase the success of future provision for homeless people, or those at risk of homelessness, we recommend the following:

* The commissioning process should recognise housing as a priority area for support within the new Work and Health Programme. The housing support provided must involve more than simply signposting participants to existing statutory support, given that local authorities have few legal duties towards single homeless people. The support provided could include:
* Support around tenancy sustainment,
* Resettlement into secure accommodation,
* Disclosing housing circumstances to potential employers,
* Securing documents to prove identity and to claim in work benefits.
* Funding for such specialist support tends to be limited, with organisations funding employment and skills provision through a mix of means, including contracts and earned income. As such, demand/need outstrips supply. We are therefore interested in the progress made by the Department for Communities and Local Government to develop a Social Impact Bond focused on tackling homelessness, which could include employment as one of its outcomes, and keen to ensure that it is developed in partnership with homelessness services and social investors, including those with experience of supporting the most vulnerable into employment.
* The pricing structures of the Work and Health Programme should reflect the additional resource required to address the often high support needs of people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Greater up-front funding should be provided within the financial model to recognise the level of investment required, alongside ‘distance travelled’ payments sequenced appropriately for people with acute housing needs, potentially co-funded by local authorities. To ensure that housing needs are not only identified but also supported and met, this element should be reflected in the minimum performance levels for the Work and Health Programme.
* The Work Programme supports participants for just two years. There should be provision to extend participation on the Work and Health Programme beyond two years if necessary, in recognition of the time it can take for people to address multiple barriers to work. This would enable individuals to continue making progress towards work past the two year point and could present an opportunity for providers to support people to progress into higher earnings once they enter work, given that many people who have experienced homelessness may be entering low wage work when they first re-enter the labour market and therefore subject to in-work conditionality under Universal Credit.
* Providers of employment support should be enabled to work effectively with homelessness and housing agencies, including charities and local authorities, in a multi-agency approach. In order to do this, the DWP and DCLG should establish data sharing policies and better align the work targets and cultures between providers and housing departments within local authorities across the board, prior to the Work and Health Programme launching in 2017.

**Case Study: Integrated housing and employment support in practice**

Claire\* became homeless after serving a prison sentence in the United States, at the end of which she was deported back to Britain. She came to Crisis, where she attended wellbeing sessions and started working with a job coach. Soon afterwards she received papers saying she had to leave her hostel because she was intentionally homeless. She was put in touch with Crisis’ housing team, who helped her find a small privately rented flat and gave her pre-tenancy training and one-on-one budgeting advice. As her wellbeing improved she began volunteering for Crisis. The employment team then gave her a grant to fund a Level Three Information Advice and Guidance (IAG) qualification and she started volunteering for a charity working with ex-offenders. When some permanent roles came up at this organisation, both her job and wellbeing coaches helped her prepare her for the interviews. She was successful and began working full-time as a case worker.

*When I came to Crisis, I thought I was coming here for help with my CV. I never thought in my life it would take me to where I am.*

*\*Not real name*

* In addition, the advent of devolution deals means that the relevant devolved bodies must all have an understanding of their local housing market and level of housing need, particularly amongst their jobseeker cohorts. Homelessness should be a key area of focus when co-designing / co-commissioning / reviewing future employment support provision with DWP, specifically with regard to who will be eligible for the Work and Health Programme and the support that will be delivered through it.

**STRIVE**, a Government funded homelessness skills and employment support pilot, was created to fill a gap in basic skills and employment support for homeless people with multiple and complex needs. It is delivered by specialist staff who can ensure that employment, skills and housing needs are addressed in a coherent and joined up manner.

The programme is delivered by St Mungo’s and Crisis and funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government and Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, and facilitated by the Department for Work and Pensions. It enables participants to develop basic skills in English, maths and IT as well as the confidence they need to prepare for and get into work.

Two years into the programme, STRIVE has enrolled 117 participants, with an attrition rate of only 14%. To date 142 qualifications have been obtained in IT, English and maths; nine people improved their housing situation; 18 people obtained full time employment; 18 people progressed into full time further education; and 19 people took up volunteering opportunities.

**Conditionality should be better tailored to individual circumstances**

There is growing evidence to suggest that homeless people are disproportionately affected by sanctions. Research commissioned by Crisis suggests that those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness are more than twice as likely to be sanctioned as the general claimant population.[[9]](#footnote-9) The sanction rate amongst those also experiencing poor mental health was found to be even higher. Sanctions can leave homeless people, who are already on very low incomes and coping with difficult life circumstances, without enough funds to cover their most basic needs. This can make it much harder to take steps to find work; 60 per cent of those interviewed for the Crisis study who had been sanctioned said it had a negative effect on their ability to look for work.

Homeless people often face difficult personal circumstances, sanctions can make these worse by pushing people into debt, hunger, straining relationships with friends, family and children and exacerbating mental and physical health problems. Sanctions can also lead to people falling into rent arrears, leading to possible eviction. 21 per cent of respondents to the Crisis research became homeless as a result of a sanction. To make the Work and Health Programme effective for homeless people we recommend:

* The activities and support that homeless people are required to do as part of their conditionality should be meaningful and tailored to their individual circumstances. Any mandated activity should take into account the impact of someone’s housing situation, and any other complex needs, on their ability to effectively seek or prepare for work; only conditions that an individual can meet should be imposed, reflected through the Claimant Commitment for any jobseeker with identified housing issues.
* The application of sanctions should be thoroughly reviewed with greater clarity about which jobseekers are classified as ‘vulnerable’. Sanctions should never be imposed if they are likely to put people at risk of homelessness or destitution. Providers should be given more discretion about when to raise a doubt about a jobseeker to Jobcentre Plus decision makers for a potential sanction, taking into account when a sanction is clearly inappropriate. Jobseekers should be made aware of the importance of disclosing any change in their housing situation in order to prevent a sanction being issued unfairly.
* ‘Easement’ rules, allowing some newly homeless people to have their work conditionality requirements lifted while they take steps to find housing, should be better publicised and extended to anyone who is homeless, until their housing situation is resolved. The use of these rules should be evaluated to make sure they are being applied appropriately and consistently.

*William has borderline learning difficulties, mental ill health (schizophrenia, anxiety and paranoia), poor computer literacy, has a support worker and has recently served a three year prison sentence. On release he was advised to claim JSA and was instructed to apply for 15 jobs per week. William made every effort to meet his requirements - ‘I pushed everything out of the way just to meet the target, like going and seeing my kids and everything like that, just to get to the target’ - but he could not apply for enough jobs and was sanctioned. A couple of months later William made a successful claim for ESA and was placed in the Support Group (i.e. recognised as not capable of work-related activity).*

[*Homeless people’s experiences of welfare conditionality and benefit sanctions*](http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/publications/sanctions_report_FINAL.pdf) *(2015) Crisis*

***Case Study: Rachel***

*Rachel started sleeping rough in 2015 after sofa surfing, she was suffering from anxiety and depression. While sleeping rough Rachel started to claim JSA. At her first appointment at JCP an advisor told Rachel that in order to claim JSA she must register online to access the Universal Job Match, upload her CV and do a daily job search.*

*Rachel said that she would meet these conditions, but left the JCP feeling unsure if she could achieve or if she had understood the things she had agreed to. Rachel had only the clothes she was wearing and did not know where her next meal was coming from. She had no computer skills, did not know how to access the internet, and had no phone or money for a public phone.*

*Rachel returned to the JCP two weeks later. She was still sleeping rough, feeling very low and felt unable to express herself. The advisor found that Rachel had not met the conditions of her claim and applied a sanction. This left Rachel reliant on supermarket vouchers for food, and donations for clothing and toiletries.*

*Rachel is now living in a St Mungo’s hostel and attending STRIVE. St Mungo’s, Crisis and Homeless Link have worked with DWP to ensure that homeless people can meet the conditions of claiming JSA by attending STRIVE. Through the programme Rachel is improving her reading and writing, as well as learning basic IT skills so that she can complete a weekly online job search. Learning these skills, together with the support she has received from her keyworker, has increased Rachel’s confidence and self-esteem and helped her to progress towards getting a job.*

**Conclusion: Closing the gap between aspiration and reality**

According to the latest research from the sector, the vast majority of homeless people want to work, yet the gap between aspiration and reality is vast.

Future provision needs to ensure that homeless jobseekers are identified early on, that data sharing issues are removed as a barrier between relevant agencies, that individuals are fast tracked into specialist support and that the conditionality and sanctions regime does not push homeless jobseekers further from the labour market.

If adopted, these recommendations could support more homeless jobseekers to move towards employment and into work, helping to transform their lives and our communities.



**ERSA** is the representative body for the employment support sector. It has over 220 members, including all the prime contractors of the major back to work programmes and a significant number of subcontractors. Two thirds of its members are not for profit.

**Crisis** is the national charity for single homeless people, dedicated to ending homelessness by delivering   
life-changing services and campaigning for change.

**Homeless Link** is the national membership charity for organisations working directly with people who experience homelessness in England.  We work to make services better and campaign for policy change that will help end homelessness.

**St Mungo’s** helps people to recover from the issues that create homelessness and to rebuild their lives. We provide a bed and support to more than 2,500 people every night and work to prevent homelessness with around 25,000 people a year.

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**Centrepoint** is the leading charity for homeless young people, and has supported more than 100,000 16-25 year olds since it was founded 1969. It provides a range of accommodation-based and floating support services in London, Yorkshire and the North of England. In addition to its housing services, Centrepoint offers employment support to both residents and non-residents, and campaigns for policy change to end youth homelessness.

**The Salvation Army** is a Christian church and registered charity present in 700 communities throughout the UK. The Salvation Army offers a range of homeless services including residential services, floating support, and community-based practical assistance. In addition, The Salvation Army currently delivers a number of government contracted welfare-to-work programmes, including Work Programme and Work Choice, alongside a network of Employment Plus Locals (job clubs).

1. Department for Communities and Local Government (2015) *Table 770 Statutory homelessness* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Bramley, G., Wilcox, S & Watts, B. (2016) *The Homelessness Monitor: England 2016.* London: Crisis /JRF [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. St Mungo’s Client Needs Survey of 1,940 residents, May 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Pleace, N. & Bretherton, J. (2014) *Crisis Skylight, An Evaluation: Year One Interim Report.* London: Crisis [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Batty, E., Beatty, C., Casey, R., Foden, M., McCarthy, L. & Reeve, K. (2015) *Homeless people’s experiences of welfare conditionality and benefit sanctions*. London: Crisis [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Homeless Link (2014) *The unhealthy state of homelessness*  [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *The Programme’s Not Working: experiences of homeless people on the Work Programme* Crisis, Homeless Link and St Mungo’s (2012) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Work Programme evaluation: the participant experience [report](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/425081/rr892.pdf), December 2014 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Batty, E., Beatty, C., Casey, R., Foden, M., McCarthy, L., Reeve, K. (2015) [*Homeless people’s experiences of welfare conditionality and benefit sanctions*](http://www.crisis.org.uk/data/files/publications/sanctions_report_FINAL.pdf)*.* London: Crisis [↑](#footnote-ref-9)