

## Employment and training schemes for homeless young people

Homeless young people are one of the most disadvantaged groups in the labour market. Their problems include low skills, lack of job readiness and inadequate information on suitable employment. When they do find jobs, there can be problems with sustaining employment. There is a range of specialist employment training projects for them and this study examines a variety of such schemes in London. It focuses on the experiences of the projects, the young people who use the schemes and those who do not. The research, by Geoffrey Randall and Susan Brown of Research and Information Services, found that:

- f** Common problems were a history of erratic school attendance, chaotic lifestyles and poor experiences of previous training schemes. Although some were highly motivated and prepared for work, others had problems with mental health and substance abuse.
- f** Those who were not engaging with the training or employment services on offer had even more disadvantaged backgrounds.
- f** The young people's housing problems further damaged their job prospects. Those who were sleeping rough had little chance of gaining employment. Although those in hostels had better prospects, the high levels of rents and some aspects of hostel life created work disincentives. Some of those rehoused in housing association homes also faced similar disincentives because of dependence on Housing Benefit to pay high rent levels.
- f** A key task was to encourage homeless young people to participate in schemes in order to counteract their previous poor experiences of schooling and training.
- f** Current good practice included: the use of incentives to develop self confidence and motivation; focusing on basic transferable work skills; flexible training with intensive one-to-one tuition; and securing help with other support needs. The young people expressed high levels of satisfaction with the services provided by the projects.
- f** The study identifies implications for future policy and practice including: more active encouragement by hostels for their residents to engage in work or training; the development of job support teams to provide more intensive help with finding and sustaining employment; the development of a 'job readiness index' to monitor both young people's progress towards employment and the performance of agencies; more advice on in-work benefits and the reform of benefits and hostel subsidies to improve work incentives.

## Background

Homeless young people suffer severe disadvantages in the labour market and a high proportion are unemployed. This evaluation examines a range of projects in London which provide specialist employment and training services for them, including initial advice, vocational guidance, core skills training, job search and employment opportunities. The projects include hostels, foyers, a resettlement team, a vocational guidance and training facility in a day centre and a Job Club. The research is based on interviews with project staff and their clients.

## The employment and training needs of homeless young people

Previous research has found that long-term unemployment in areas such as London, with strong job markets, results from the disadvantages which some people have in the market, rather than from an absolute shortage of jobs. This study found that many homeless young people experience a range of disadvantages in the labour market including inadequate job information, lack of active job searching, lack of necessary work skills, employer discrimination and lack of a stable home. Many have additional problems such as poor levels of education and qualifications. Some have mental health and substance abuse problems. Clients of the homelessness agencies in the study who do not participate in the employment and training services on offer ('non-users') have even higher levels of disadvantage than those who do participate ('users'). Many of the non-users surveyed did not appear to be participating in any productive activity. They were excluded not only from the labour market, but also from services designed to combat their exclusion.

Although many homeless young people in the study had jobs in the past, they were often only for short periods. Problems over sustaining employment were as important as difficulties over gaining access to the labour market.

## Accommodation and employment

Many of the homeless young people in the study had an extended history of insecure accommodation and this adversely affected their employment prospects. Half of the users of employment and training services and two-thirds of the non-users said that accommodation problems had made it difficult for them to find or keep a job.

People sleeping rough find it extremely difficult to sustain work, but those in hostels also have difficulties. Interviews with staff and users found that the high level of rents, paid for by Housing Benefit, acts as a major work disincentive because of the phased withdrawal of benefit from those in work. The absence of a work culture in some hostels can reinforce these problems, whereas in other hostels staff have an important role in encouraging residents to engage with employment or training.

High rent levels in some permanent housing, particularly housing association and private rented accommodation, can also create work disincentives because of the level of dependence on Housing Benefit to pay the rent.

## Training

Many of the homeless young people had experience of poor education at school and of low quality training schemes. At the same time, casual work for cash in hand is relatively easy to obtain. For these reasons, some are not motivated to engage with training to improve their employment prospects. Projects have developed a range of methods for encouraging them to participate including: operating in hostels and day centres rather than in colleges; covering other topics of interest and concern to homeless young people in addition to employment-related skills; building in incentives such as travel and meal allowances and access to trips and adventure courses; following up participants who miss sessions and offering courses for an initial short period, which may then be extended.

Courses often need to concentrate on basic transferable work skills and it is these that employers

identify as the most important for job applicants. Factors which enhance the success of courses include: flexibility in subject matter and time commitment required; delivery which avoids an alienating classroom atmosphere; work on a one-to-one basis or in small groups; early assessment of learning difficulties such as dyslexia, which may not have been identified previously; including access to qualifications on the completion of courses and taster sessions on vocational courses to help trainees to decide on their future.

When homeless young people were ready for a vocational course, the projects in the study found it was more effective to help them to get onto mainstream courses rather than run special vocational courses for them.

### Finding and sustaining employment: advice and support services

The study found that advice and support were critical elements in providing an effective service for this group. Homeless young people can be disadvantaged in the labour market either by unrealistic expectations or, conversely, by a lack of self-confidence and low motivation.

Many of them think they would lose all benefit entitlement and be worse off in work. They need more detailed and effective advice on the extent to which they would be better off in work at different income levels.

Although some employers are wary of recruiting homeless people, many do not regard those in hostels as homeless. However, many homeless young people believe that most employers are prejudiced against them.

Many users of employment and training services were hoping to find more skilled jobs after they had finished training. Non-users of services were more likely to lack a sense of directed job searching and to say they would take any work they could find; once again indicating a lack of information on suitable job opportunities, or low motivation, or both.

The users had received a wide range of support from their projects, including vocational guidance,

job searching, help with making applications, interview practice, help with self presentation and mentoring. However, nearly half would have liked more help, suggesting the need for more intensive support for some people.

Projects had developed a range of techniques for enhancing motivation where this was needed, including: encouragement from hostel workers, employment and training targets built into individual action plans drawn up with individual clients, and identifying and building on existing skills.

Key features of effective advice and support services include: drop-in and outreach services where young people can get immediate help without appointments in advance; individual employment action plans; identification of support needs such as mental health or substance abuse; referral to specialist services and joint work with hostel keyworkers and housing resettlement services. Some projects are developing successful mentoring services using volunteers.

Many homeless young people had had jobs in the past but had not kept them. There is a need to develop more services to support them once in employment.

Possible future developments include: more effective co-ordination of services; joint assessments and service provision by agencies; and an integrated support service through job support teams, providing vocational guidance, training and help to sustain employment. Voluntary organisations could themselves offer more employment and training opportunities to homeless people.

### Evaluating outcomes

There is currently a serious gap in the performance measurement of many projects and a need to develop recording systems and outcome measures which accurately reflect their work. This would include not just qualifications and jobs obtained, but also progress towards job readiness which could be measured on a new 'job readiness index'. The projects supported the principle of developing such a measure of distance travelled. (The full report highlights a range of possible

factors which could be included in the index and recommends further work to develop it.)

On one important measure, client satisfaction, the projects were performing well, with 86 per cent either satisfied or very satisfied with the services.

### Implications for policy and practice

The study identifies implications for future policy and practice including:

- more active encouragement by hostels for their residents to engage in work or training;
- more outreach services;
- lower rents in hostels, paid for by transferring funds from Housing Benefit;
- the development of job support teams to provide more intensive help with finding and sustaining employment;
- the further development of mentoring schemes;
- more involvement of employers in providing training;
- the development of a 'job readiness index' to monitor both the progress of young people towards employment and the performance of agencies;
- more advice on in-work benefits;
- the reform of benefits to improve work incentives.

### About the study

The research was carried out by Geoffrey Randall and Susan Brown of Research and Information Services, in conjunction with Centrepoint. The research consisted of: information from agency records; interviews with project managers and staff; interviews with service users drawn from the projects providing employment services and with homeless young people not currently using these services; group discussions with project clients and interviews with employers who had worked with the projects. Similar projects in Bristol and Birmingham were also examined for comparative purposes.

### How to get further information

The full report, **Ending exclusion: employment and training schemes for homeless young people** by Geoffrey Randall and Susan Brown, is published for the Foundation by YPS (ISBN 1 902633 09 1, price £13.95 plus £2 p&p).