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# Is Work an Answer to Homelessness? Evaluating an Employment Programme for Homeless Adults

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- **Abstract\_** *There is mounting evidence that preventative services and Housing First, working with other homelessness services within an integrated homelessness strategy, can greatly reduce the experience of lone adult homelessness. However, progress in reducing the socioeconomic inequalities and poor social integration associated with lone adult homelessness has been more mixed. Housing can be both secured and sustained, but absence of family and friendship ties, poor community inclusion, relatively poor health and economic exclusion can still continue after the physical experience of homelessness has ended. This paper draws on a two-year longitudinal evaluation of a multi-site programme that was designed to promote economic and social integration among homeless people in the UK. Tracking a cohort of people using the service over two years, it was found that people whose lives had been characterised by sustained social and economic integration prior to homelessness were most readily assisted by the programme. Successes were also achieved with homeless people who had little experience of formal paid work, and with people with higher needs for treatment and support, but results were more mixed. Work secured with the help of the programme could play an important role in facilitating and sustaining an exit from homelessness. However, some programme participants who were 'successful', in that they secured work and were no longer homeless, found themselves in a liminal state, in which their employment and housing were both poor quality and insecure.*
- **Keywords\_** *Homelessness and social integration, social cohesion, employment, education and training, labour market activation.*

## **Socioeconomic Integration as a Potential Route out of Homelessness**

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The idea that an exit from poverty and integration into society is best achieved by getting a paid job is a mainstay of European social policy. Attempts at labour market activation as a response to homelessness are also a feature of homelessness and wider social policy across the OECD. There are those who maintain that the profound inequalities generated by late Capitalism (Piketty, 2014) might be mainly to blame for homelessness in the first place (Kuhn and Culhane, 1998; Okamoto, 2007; O'Sullivan, 2008; O'Flaherty, 2010; Willse, 2010). Others argue that the humanity and agency of homeless people must be at the core of understanding homelessness (McNaughton, 2006; Parsell, 2018). Most of what has been written focuses on trying to understand a supposed intersection of structural and individual factors (Caton, 1990; Neale, 1997; Pleace, 2000; Fitzpatrick, 2005; Farrugia and Gerrard, 2015; Pleace, 2016).

There are data suggesting countries with extensive welfare systems and lower inequality have less homelessness (Benjaminsen and Andrade, 2015; Benjaminsen, 2016; Benjaminsen and Knutagård, 2016), while ethnographic studies (Dordick, 1997; Gill, 2015; Marr, 2015) show the human dimensions and the role of individual agency. The emergent research on women's homelessness suggest gender variations in homeless pathways, again showing that understanding individual agency needs to be part of understanding homelessness (Mayock and Sheridan, 2012; Bretherton, 2017). Specific groups of characteristics, behaviours and treatment needs are repeatedly reported in long-term and recurrently homeless populations (Kemp et al., 2006; Bowpitt et al., 2011; Benjaminsen and Andrade, 2015; O'Donoghue-Hynes et al., 2015; Benjaminsen, 2016; Metraux et al., 2016), alongside some data indicating that these characteristics can develop during, rather than before, homelessness (Culhane et al., 2013). Gowan (2010) characterises the various arguments within this mix, the orthodoxy of homelessness as being a mix of the individual and structural factors, as sin-talk (deviant action), sick-talk (illness, particularly mental illness) and system-talk (systemic drivers).

Homelessness services fall into two main groups. Housing readiness services are centred on making a homeless person able to live and cope on their own before offering housing, changing supposedly negative behaviours, ensuring treatment compliance and promoting socioeconomic integration, setting targets on the road to a single model of 'housing readiness' (Sahlin, 2005; Tabol et al., 2009; Rosenheck, 2010). Housing First and housing-led services, by contrast, provide housing quickly and deliver choice-led support services, coproducing support with homeless people that is designed to promote health, wellbeing and socioeconomic integration (Tsemberis, 2010; Tsemberis, 2010a; Greenwood et al., 2013). These two

models are aiming for essentially the same thing, the promotion of a normal life, within normal social and economic conventions, this means both have an element of behavioural modification (Hansen-Löfstrand and Juhila, 2012), albeit that they are working in quite different ways (Pleace and Bretherton, 2017).

Neither housing-ready nor Housing First/housing-led services achieve consistent outcomes around social integration. For housing ready services, also known as 'treatment first' or 'staircase' services, the problem is low programme completion rates, people run away from strict regimes, or get stuck on a 'step', and do not progress to a state of supposed 'housing readiness' (Pleace, 2008). For Housing First, the issue is mixed outcomes, the strengths in sustaining housing are not always being matched by consistent increases in social integration (Padgett, 2007; Kertesz et al., 2009; Stanhope and Dunn, 2011; Johnson et al., 2012; Tsai and Rosenheck, 2012; Pleace and Quilgars, 2013; Quilgars and Pleace, 2016; Leclair et al., 2019). Alongside this, the emergency and temporary accommodation that still forms much of European homelessness service provision, does not promote socio-economic integration, although there are daytime services in parts of Central and Eastern Europe, that do not offer housing, but which are geared to labour market activation (Pleace et al., 2018).

In response to evidence of low rates of socioeconomic integration, specific homelessness services have been developed that try to promote integration, usually through getting people into paid work, or into education and training that will lead to paid work. The different forms of intervention can be, broadly, classified into three main groups:

- 'Work-Ready' models that focus on trying to make homeless people attractive prospects to employers, for example via education, training, work placements, volunteering/unpaid internships and help with seeking and securing jobs.
- 'Work First' models that use a supported placement approach that puts homeless people straight into employment, providing support until their job is secure, often known as individual placement and support services. These are also known as individual placement and support (IPS) services which are used for various groups facing barriers to employment, including homeless people.
- 'Work Providing' models that use a social business, social enterprise or charitably or publicly subsidised employment programme to provide homeless and formerly homeless people with work.

There is considerable diversity in how these services and programmes are organised. These services can be charitable, be provided/funded by government, involve philanthropic activity by the private sector, or involve various combinations of agencies across different sectors (Balkin, 1992; Trutko et al., 1998; Randall and

Brown, 1999; Bridgman, 2001; Malone, 2005; Singh, 2005; Luby and Welch, 2006; Rosenheck and Mares, 2007; Shaheen and Rio, 2007; Poremski et al., 2015; Hoven et al., 2016; Poremski et al., 2017; Stacy et al., 2017).

The work-ready approaches mirror what is done by European welfare states, which often have various programmes centred on labour market activation for people claiming welfare benefits. Sometimes these programmes are voluntary, but they are increasingly tied into welfare systems, i.e. one is always required to undertake work-readiness/labour market activation programmes as a condition of access to welfare payments and to demonstrate that one is searching for work, unless passing strict tests that determine entering paid work is not possible (Dwyer, 2016).

Homeless people do engage with these mainstream systems where they are eligible for welfare benefits, with conditionality requirements making them engage with various forms of labour market activation (Beatty et al., 2015). Core elements of EU policy, the Social Investment Package (SIP), the Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI) programme and the European Social Fund (ESF) are all designed to promote labour market activation, although welfare policy is a reserved power for member states. Where more specialist labour market activation services are provided for homeless people, they may be more flexible, offer different kinds of support or more intensive support, than existing services.

Social enterprise, an array of broadly related entrepreneurial innovation designed to generate both social and economic benefits, is also used to promote social and economic integration, again usually with emphasis on paid work. This includes businesses that divert profits into working with homeless people, so for example a restaurant or landscaping company, that recruits and trains homeless people (Hibbert et al., 2002; Teasdale, 2010, Teasdale et al., 2011; Teasdale 2012). Social enterprise can also be combined with other services, one example is Emmaus, which uses profits to house, support, employ and train homeless people (Clarke, 2010). Some homelessness services may directly employ homeless people to provide services, or support internships or volunteering opportunities designed to help people into employment (Barker and Maguire, 2017).

The literature suggests mixed results for labour market activation and social integration and employment services for homeless people. Coaching or support services can have a positive effect on securing work, with homeless people receiving support having a better chance of getting work than those not being supported (Hoven et al., 2016). However, any supply side intervention focused on labour, i.e. making the (potential) workforce, in this instance homeless people, more attractive to employers has two inherent limitations. First, economic context will make a difference, a well-trained and educated workforce will attract employers to some areas that are advantageous in other respects, such as major cities. However, areas characterised by

sustained economic decline do not necessarily become prosperous because initiatives are in place to train unemployed people. If there are not enough jobs, training unemployed people, including unemployed homeless people and making them 'work ready', will not necessarily create new work. Second, negative attitudes towards homeless people among employers can be a major barrier to employment. Homeless people may be inaccurately stereotyped as drug-users, criminals or as experiencing severe mental illness. In addition, some homeless people may also face practical barriers to employment associated with unmet treatment and support needs, limiting illness and disability (Poremski et al., 2016).

A further potential criticism is the nature of the work being provided by social enterprises and businesses, i.e. the question of whether homeless people who have work experience in one or more of these forms of supported employment can realistically transfer to another, 'mainstream' job in the formal economy. Here the concern is that homeless people may become engaged in what are, in effect, differentiated forms of employment, i.e. work experience that is not directly transferable to the formal economy and that will not count, or be downgraded, in the open labour market.

Results for 'Work First', or IPS services for homeless people, can be positive. However, the scale and scope of such services may be limited by overall labour market conditions and the extent to which employers are prepared to sign up as participants in a programme (Poremski et al., 2017). Resources are also a potential limitation; support workers need to be in place who can provide the direct help to formerly homeless people who are adjusting to life in employment. Likewise, work providing models using social enterprise, social business and dedicated or sheltered employment programmes require resources, which means that while they may show successes, they cannot necessarily be replicated at scale, as they are seen as too expensive (Teasdale et al., 2011; Teasdale, 2012).

Mainstream labour market activation services may not work well for homeless people. The British welfare system, which adapted mainstream services for specific groups, was assessed as actually worsening employment outcomes for homeless people, and as potentially triggering homelessness through use of 'sanctions' against people who were assessed as insufficiently engaged with labour market activation (Sanders et al., 2013; National Audit Office, 2017). It can also be argued that mass unemployment may function as a significant trigger for homelessness (Mitra, 2011), albeit that there are the various disagreements about the nature of homelessness causation (Pleace, 2016).

The role of housing is also important. The limitations of 'daytime' services, i.e. education, training and employment/labour market activation which provides no help with housing and are not part of an integrated strategy, can be compared to

those of health services for homeless people that function in isolation, effectively attempting to treat people while they are without housing. The problems centre on the lack of a settled base, an adequate and affordable home that is a suitable foundation for integration into the formal economy. The phenomenon of 'working homeless' people living in tents and cars may be less common than in the USA, but represents a situation in which (nominal) economic inclusion has not alleviated homelessness, and all the potential risks of homelessness to health, wellbeing and social integration remain in place (Metraux et al., 2018).

There has been criticism of what are seen as the ideological assumptions behind various models of labour market activation programmes for homeless people. Some research has argued that 'work ready' services for homeless people are neoliberal/ neo-reactionary constructs, that work from the premise that homelessness is entirely self-inflicted and must be resolved by enforcing behavioural modification, i.e. changing the 'work-shy' or 'work refusing' into the 'work-ready' and 'work compliant' (Dordick, 2002; Willse, 2010; Garrido, 2016). Again, there are criticisms that such interventions both fail to recognise and overcome economic realities. For example, making someone 'work ready' will not necessarily result in employment in a depressed labour market or overcome negative attitudes from potential employers (Dordick, 2002; Ferguson et al., 2012). These critiques are within wider attacks on labour market activation programmes as making people take any employment available, sanctioning for non-compliance, and paying, at best, scant attention to individual wellbeing while, again, failing to recognise the realities of depressed labour markets (Garland, 2001; Wacquant, 2009; Dwyer, 2018).

## The Research

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The research was an evaluation of an NGO led employment programme operating across six cities in the UK. The research was both formative and summative. The formative element of the evaluation provided ongoing feedback on the performance and effectiveness of services that could be used to fine-tune and if necessary, modify service activity. The summative function of the evaluation was delivered in the interim and final reports. The main goals of the research were to:

- Assess effectiveness in promoting socioeconomic integration for homeless people, within a 'theory of change' model devised by the service provider. This model highlighted employment and financial stability, good health and wellbeing, housing stability and good relationships and social networks.
- Test the effectiveness of labour market activation through education, training, support with searching for work, interview skills and developing a CV (résumé), alongside practical support.

- Test the effectiveness of related supports designed to help enhance health and wellbeing, housing stability and personal and community relationships, alongside delivery of labour market activation.
- Employ a model that assessed effectiveness from the perspective of people using the programme and that used longitudinal data to track the impacts of the programme on their life over a period of two years.

The six centres provided individual support with job seeking, such as help assembling a résumé, help searching for work, training in interview techniques, assistance with transport and access to appropriate clothing for interview. Basic education in information technology, mathematics and literacy was offered, as was a small range of vocational training. There was also individual assistance and some financial support with accessing externally provided training and further education, e.g. arranging and funding access to short courses run by local colleges. The centres could also offer some practical and financial support to facilitate self-employment and support with accessing mental health and health services. Direct support was also available with securing housing, chiefly in the form of housing advice, but the programme and most of its resources were focused on economic integration (Pleace and Bretherton, 2014; Bretherton and Pleace, 2016; Pleace and Bretherton, 2017).

The programme also offered an array of arts-based activities, which were intended to develop emotional literacy and skills in working collaboratively among individuals whose engagement with formal education and training had hitherto been limited. Some support was also provided with housing, mainly locating homes in the private rented sector and support on how to manage a tenancy agreement (rental agreement) and with mental and physical health, centred on low intensity service brokering/case management services.

The programme used a mix of building-based services, which were fixed sites that homeless people were encouraged to visit and mobile or outreach services. Initially, some sites were more focused on the former and others on the latter, but over time a hybrid form of organisation began to emerge, with a mix of service provision. Not all services possessed quite the same mix of services, the most important distinction here was the presence of a social enterprise café at three of the sites, which were also the largest, although it was also the case that two sites were able to offer a wider range of arts-based activities than the others. Part of the variation was linked to what other services and opportunities for connection existed in each area and this varied between the cities in which the programme sites were located: Birmingham, Edinburgh, Liverpool, London, Newcastle and Oxford. However, the core activities and the theory of change model used by all six sites were identical, the programme was uniform in term of its core design and mission.



Anyone defined as homeless or at risk of homelessness could access the programme, which included people living rough, in emergency shelters, in temporary supported housing, in temporary/emergency accommodation and at direct risk of homelessness due to eviction. The programme emphasised service user choice, which meant each person worked with support staff to define their own goals, in relation to education, training and employment outcomes, which the programme then sought to support.

Arts-based activities were mainly designed on the basis that participation was the goal, with the intention being to build confidence that would encourage use of the education and employment services. Basic skills education and the training either offered certification of basic achievements and/or resulted in recognised accreditation. Grants were available that could support someone to start their own business, including work related to particular strengths in arts-based activity. For example, if someone showed real musical talent, pursuing a musical career was a possibility that could be supported.

Attendance at classes, one-to-one support and arts-based activities was quite strictly timetabled, respondents reported being expected to arrive and depart within a narrow time window that allowed only a few minutes before and after each contact. Facilities for socialisation, space where service users could, for example, avoid bad weather while waiting for classes or other activities were not provided by those centres with their own buildings, nor at the other locations at which services were delivered. Service users were also not allowed to engage with the six centres if they were intoxicated and could be ejected for violent or challenging behaviour. This is not unusual in the sense that spaces shared by homeless populations tend to be relatively regulated (Hansen-Löfstrand, 2015), although staff at the six centres described this regulation as logistically necessary, rather than as reflecting particular attitudes about homeless populations. People using the programme had to go where the courses, activities and support were provided in order to access services.

The programme contained elements of a 'work ready' model. The emphasis on choice and control for the people using its services meant that it was collaborative, rather than setting targets and expectations on homeless people without consultation. The programme was focused on working with someone to make themselves more employable and/or directly placing them in work, for example by funding and supporting self-employment, in the ways that that individual chose for themselves. The programme did not adopt an IPS model, it could help arrange apprenticeships and work experience placements, but did not collaborate with employers or provide workers in a way that would be found in a 'Work First' model.

## Methods

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The research was a two-year evaluation of the programme over the course of 2014-2015, with analysis running into 2016. A mixed methods approach was adopted. This involved sharing and analysis of entirely anonymised administrative data, semi-structured in-depth interviews with staff at the six sites and a series of 20 focus groups with 145 service users, the results of which are reported elsewhere (Pleace and Bretherton, 2017).

The main element of the research was a qualitative, longitudinal cohort study which tracked a group of people using the programme over the course of 2014-2015 employing four, in-depth, qualitative interviews conducted at six monthly intervals. The cohort study recorded the experience of homelessness among this group, their contact with and opinions of the six centres and tracked any impact that the six centres had on homelessness trajectories. This analysis is the focus of this paper.

The research used a structured interview which covered a series of standardised 'core questions' on housing situation/homelessness, employment situation (also encompassing participation in education and training), social integration (personal relationships and community participation) and health and wellbeing. These questions were used to track changes over time and after the initial interview, the researchers provided a structured summary of their responses in the last interview, to check that the data had been recorded correctly last time and as a prompt for the respondent to talk about any changes. Respondents were also asked to talk freely about their experiences of using the programme and were asked, at their initial interview, about their personal history and their routes into – and experiences of – homelessness. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, with the researchers using Nvivo as a shared resource for systematic qualitative analysis, tracking their interpretations of responses to minimise any risk of inconsistency in how the answers of each respondent were interpreted.

The cohort study used a 'permission to locate' approach, which involved asking permission to recontact each respondent for subsequent interviews and also asking for contact details for any individuals or services who were likely to know where the respondent was, if they could not be reached directly by the researchers. At each subsequent interview, the permission to contact the individual and continued permission to use any other points of contact the individual had shared to locate them was renewed and any alterations agreed and noted.

The cohort study adopted an approach of free and informed consent, i.e. beyond someone agreeing to be involved, the researchers had to be entirely satisfied that the respondent fully understood what was happening, how collected data would be stored and used and that anonymised data would be retained for further analysis

once the initial research was complete (contact and personal details for each respondent were securely destroyed once the cohort study was complete). The study was subject to independent ethical review at the researchers' University, prior to fieldwork commencing.

Sampling for the cohort study was not designed to represent the service users for the six centres as a whole. As the research was intended to explore the outcomes for the six centres, respondents were randomly selected from people who had engaged with the centres for at least one 12 week 'term' of training, education, job-seeking and arts-based activities and were current service users at the point at which they were first interviewed. Thirty percent of the respondents were women and 61% were in their thirties or forties, the majority (68%) were of White European descent, broadly reflecting the characteristics of the wider user base for the six centres.

A total of 158 respondents took part in 406 interviews for the cohort study. In all, 169 hours of interviews were recorded and analysed using dedicated qualitative analysis software. The interviews ranged from approximately 20 to 40 minutes in length.

Fifty-six people completed all four of the interviews and 27 completed three interviews. At the second interview, respondents who could not be located were replaced with an alternative respondent with broadly similar characteristics. Twenty-two respondents completed two interviews and 53 respondents took part in a single interview. This paper focuses on the results from the 83 people, who either completed three interviews over 18 months, or who took part in all four interviews over 24 months.

The 83 respondents were not necessarily representative of all medium to long-term service users and were, of course, a group drawn from homeless people who had voluntarily sought assistance from an education, employment and training service that also offered arts-based activities, meaning they were also not necessarily typical of homeless people more generally.

Thirty per cent were women and 61% were aged in their 30s and 40s. Older men, aged 50 and above, outnumbered older women (26% of men compared to 15% of women). Sixty-eight percent were White European, with the next largest ethnic group being Black/Black British people (18%). The cohort was not representative of programme users as a whole as the purpose of the research was to explore programme outcomes, which meant that they all had at least several weeks experience of using the programme, whereas many of those engaging with the programme did so only very briefly (for details see: Bretherton and Pleace, 2016; Pleace and Bretherton, 2017).

## A Route Out of Homelessness?

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The programme had helped most of the 83 people. Some had returned to paid work (39%), others to education and training (18%) and another group were actively seeking work with a sense they had a realistic prospect of finding it (16%). Most of the 83 viewed the programme as flexible, tolerant, understanding and for the most part as effective.

The cohort study showed four patterns of contact between the 83 service users and the six centres, based on the situation of respondents at their last interview. There were four groups who could be defined as people who were 'reintegrating', people who were moving into education, training and employment for the 'first time', people whose progress towards labour market and social integration was characterised by erratic progress, with both advances and reverses occurring during the analysis and people who, while using the six centres, experienced 'no change' to their marginalised social and economic position. The bulk of those using the six centres were within the first two groups, 47% were 'reintegrating' and 33% were integrating economically for the first time, with the 'no change' group being smaller (12%) and the 'erratic progress' group being the least numerous (8%).

The 'reintegrating' group were people whose working lives or progress through further or higher education had been disrupted by homelessness, but who had been economically and socially integrated for most or all of their lives prior to that point. Relationship breakdown, mental or physical illness, occasionally alcohol, drug or gambling addiction and in some instances, unemployment had been a trigger for their homelessness. Contact with the programme could be quite brief for this group, as existing work histories and relatively high levels of education, alongside recent employment experience or already having secured a University or College place, could mean that they could work directly with workers whose role was to help them seek and secure a job, rather than need to pursue training, education or engage with arts-based activity first.

Homelessness had not been a long-term or recurrent experience for the 'reintegrating' group, they had become homeless, or been assessed as at immediate risk of homelessness, after a sustained period of social and economic integration. Their norms were societal norms, of holding down paid work, completing further or higher education and running their own lives, including where and how they lived. Their experience of homelessness was transitional and in some instances one of the reasons for this was the support from one of the six centres, alongside support from other homelessness services, social landlords and the public health system. The presence of a group, recently employed or in education, seeking assistance from a homelessness service designed to connect people to employment and education might have been anticipated. Homelessness had, for the most part,

occurred, but the programme was working as a preventative service, an intervention that could help stop that homelessness becoming sustained or prolonged. This programme had worked effectively with a group of people whose homelessness had been short-term, who had fallen out of mainstream economic and social life and been helped back up, at least in part through services offered by the six centres that were more specifically tailored to the experience of homeless people than the mainstream employment services attached to the UK welfare system (Pleace and Bretherton, 2017).

The 'first time' group were people who were moving away from a longer-term experience of economic and social exclusion, which could be associated with a longer or repeated experience of homelessness, and towards education, training and employment. It was among this group that the programme achieved its 'headline' results, helping a former rough sleeper into work, or a long-term homeless person into college or university. This population are the group on which labour market activation services for homeless people are often, at least nominally, intended for. In a few cases, people in this group were long-term and recurrently homeless people with high and complex needs.

Importantly, the programme was a choice-led approach, it did not advocate or require a set of specific behavioural changes, nor work on the basis that an individual had to take any opportunity that presented itself. This 'first time' group was being made 'work ready' but in a quite specific way, i.e. in ways that were, at least in part, determined by themselves, pursuing education, training and job opportunities within a choice-led framework, rather than being within a Fordist structure that tried to make everyone 'work ready' in a single, set way (Bretherton and Pleace, 2016).

A smaller group made 'erratic progress' engaging with education, training or paid work, but unable to complete the process or sustain their position, sometimes because of a change in circumstances, but most often because an existing limiting illness, disability or mental health problem worsened. Addiction was not among the reasons why this small group, who moved both towards and away from greater economic and social integration were in this position.

Individual wellbeing and health issues could not be overcome by the programme. Specific support, in the form of low intensity case management and emotional/practical support was part of the programme, although not available in every area during the course of the evaluation (Pleace and Bretherton, 2014a). However, once a deterioration in health was sufficient to mean that it became impractical to pursue education, training or work, all that could be done was to support referral to health and social care services.

Alongside this group, there were those individuals who, although they were actively engaged with the programme for some time, had 'no change' in their economic or social position. How exactly this is defined is important. Some of this small group experienced positive changes as a result of engaging with the arts-based and educational services offered by the programme, reporting better quality of life and greater wellbeing, as they had something that they found constructive and/or enjoyable to do during the day.

This group contained individuals who became very long-term users of the programme for these reasons but were repeating activities without their social or economic position changing. Barriers to education, training and paid work included relative old age, particularly where this was combined with limiting illness or disability, sheer distance from the experience of paid work or education, i.e. many years or decades away from such experiences, including incomplete basic education as a child and specific support needs that might include addiction and severe mental illness. Paid work for some of the people in this group might still be a possibility but may have required much more intensive services than were on offer, or may simply have been an unrealistic goal, a pattern that reflects results from some other studies (Poremski et al., 2016).

As the programme developed, attitudes towards the 'no change' group began to change, as they were using resources, often at comparatively high rates, without any progress being made with respect to the stated goal of the programme to promote labour market activation. A process of withdrawing the service from this group, which in some cases produced anger and resentment, was begun towards the end of the evaluation period. This group's quality of life had often been improved by the programme, because they had something enjoyable and constructive to do during the day, albeit that the goal of labour market activation was not being achieved.

While a relatively small group, the people in this situation were often benefitting from the programme, which prompts some questions about the role of this sort of intervention and whether, for example, arts-based and basic skills education might be broadly beneficial to some long-term and repeatedly homeless people, without any fixed expectation that they will at some point move closer to economic participation. This relates to issues around health and wellbeing, social integration and support which stem from opportunities to socialise. The programme was clear – for example in not providing informal meeting space and expecting people not involved in a specific activity to leave the spaces in which they worked – that it was focused on economic engagement. However, for this group, an emphasis on moving into paid work was not appropriate and other kinds of support, with goals around simply promoting social integration, friendship and socialisation, was more appropriate.

The research showed evidence of individuals drawing on the support of the programme, sometimes in combination with other services, to enable and sustain a clear exit from homelessness, which included some marked successes, including formerly homeless people setting up their own successful businesses, alongside entering or re-entering skilled and semi-skilled professions (Pleace and Bretherton, 2014; Bretherton and Pleace, 2016; Pleace and Bretherton, 2017). In these cases, formerly homeless people – in the ‘reintegrating’ and ‘first time’ groups, were in stable jobs and, where eligible and required also being supported by the welfare system, with sufficient income to afford the stable, adequate housing they were occupying. Social housing, which in the UK typically has rent levels around 60% of market levels, could make lower paid work more viable in terms of meeting both housing and living costs. Higher paid work could mean that better quality and more stable private rented housing was an option. People who used the programme and who exited homelessness were not generally in a position to buy.

However, nominally successful outcomes for the programme did not always mean that someone had secured a sustainable exit from homelessness. Income precarity and housing precarity, alongside low or very low incomes, could mean that exits from homelessness were incomplete, with people entering a liminal state between homelessness and housed/social integrated.

The nature of work that could be secured, reflecting longstanding patterns of hyper-casualisation in UK and European labour markets was not always high quality. Jobs could be mundane and unpleasant, relatively poorly paid (the minimum UK wage is approximately 1 463.80 EUR a month, for 37.5 hours, source: Eurostat). However, housing stability and social integration could be precarious because work was only part-time, particularly zero-hour contracts, or was only available temporarily. Zero-hour contracts in UK law mean that someone does not have to work when asked to, nor can they be prohibited from seeking work elsewhere, which creates flexibility for workers, but employers are not obliged to actually give anyone work and, to maintain a contract, are generally expected to be ready to work when called upon. Part-time job hours can also vary. Unpredictable income meant that budgeting, including affording rent, could be difficult, particularly as the welfare system could prove slow, limited and inflexible when someone was working part of the time. There is strong evidence that the UK welfare system, intended to guarantee a basic income and allowing fluctuations in earned income, has become characterised by both deep logistical problems and questionable ethics (Alston, 2018; Dwyer, 2018). Where work was short-term, periods of relative security might be followed by precarity and a risk of recurrent homelessness, unless another equivalent or better job could be secured.

The other issue, in every location in which the programme worked, was access to stable, high quality and affordable housing. Social housing stock is under extreme pressure throughout the UK and access, particularly for households without someone with high and complex treatment needs, disability or limiting illness or a parent or parents with dependent children, is often not a practical proposition (Tunstall and Pleace, 2018). To people on relatively low wages, or partially or wholly supported by the welfare system, the lower end (cheapest third) of the private rented sector was likely to be the only affordable or viable option.

The costs of housing were high relative to what most of the 83 people using the programme could afford, either in full or part-time work, or if being supported by the welfare system in full or part time training or education, which meant sometimes only lower standard housing could be afforded. Rental contracts in the UK, at the time of the evaluation, were variations on the assured short-hold tenancy agreements, which give private sector landlords a high degree of flexibility with respect to eviction and allows 6- or 12-month contracts, which do not have to be renewed. Some of the 83 people had to move several times when housing ceased to be available, affordable or was of poor quality, after their experience of actual homelessness had ended.

Several respondents secured a succession of temporary jobs while they were in contact with the researchers and others had two or more jobs to try to cover their living costs. For those in education, training or in part-time work, full or partial reliance on social protection payments could be highly challenging, particularly in those situations where the housing element of their payments did not fully cover rental costs.

For some of the people in the 'reintegrating' and 'first time' groups, both their economic and housing positions were liminal, not situations of homelessness, but not situations of stable economic integration or secure housing either. Other European and North American evidence suggests the presence of precariously housed populations whose lives are characterised by very low, unpredictable incomes. Some work has argued this is both the nascent transitionally homeless population and the population to which transitionally homeless people return on exiting homelessness (Meert and Bourgeois, 2005; Lee et al., 2010).

It is important to note that the programme was not confined to one offer of support. If someone found themselves unemployed, at risk of homelessness or some combination of the two, they could return to the programme for further assistance and in a few cases this had happened.



## Conclusions

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There was clear evidence that the programme could have a positive effect, either supplementing the role of other homelessness and preventative services or providing the means to exit homelessness through variations combinations of education, training and helping people into paid work, which could include productive use of arts-based activities (Pleace and Bretherton, 2014; Bretherton and Pleace, 2016; Pleace and Bretherton, 2017).

There were many dimensions to this programme and this paper was concerned with just one, whether a range of services focused primarily, though not exclusively, on labour market activation could provide a lasting solution to homelessness. The answer was yes, when the right outcomes were combined with the right context, i.e. labour market activation happened, relatively secure and well-paid work was found and an affordable and, again, relatively secure housing option was found. The people this result was most likely to be achieved for were those closest to the mainstream of social and economic life, those who were reintegrating. There were also people with more sustained or recurrent experience of homelessness who were brought into a much more stable and secure situation, again found the right kind of work and were either supported in getting the right kind of housing, or located it for themselves, moving into the socioeconomic mainstream for the first time.

However, clear limits existed with respect to what the programme could do, it did not always overcome individual circumstances when making someone 'work-ready' was not a viable option. More importantly, a nominal 'success' was still not necessarily a lasting solution to homelessness, work could be secured, as could housing, but both could be precarious and poor quality, so that rather than exiting homelessness, some of the programme users entered a liminal state, not homeless, but not a comfortable distance away from homelessness either. Here the value of a longitudinal analysis, being able to track the 83 individuals over two years was very valuable, highlighting both sustainable successes but also shining a light on nominal successes, where labour market activation had not provided a sustainable exit from homelessness, even though work had been secured. Working homelessness was not occurring, but working while being in a situation of housing insecurity, i.e. employed but at risk of homelessness and/or still socially marginalised, was an outcome for some homeless people.

There are inherent limitations to all service models, services fail when someone needs more help, or a different kind of support, than they are designed to give and when there are external challenges that it can be difficult for services to counteract. To work really well, more secure, well paid work and affordable, adequate housing with reasonable security of tenure were required and this was not something the programme could do anything about, it could work with what it had, a capacity to

enhance potential employability for service users, helping connect people with jobs, education and training and helping people find suitable housing, but often where there was not enough relatively well paying and secure work, nor enough affordable, adequate housing. There were people among the 83 whose needs, experiences and characteristics were associated with support and treatment needs that it was beyond the capacity and the remit of the programme to provide help with. All the programme could do was try to connect them to other services, there was not a realistic prospect of getting them into work, nor, with its focus on labour market activation, could the programme necessarily be the catalyst that enabled them to exit homelessness.

The shift away from working with people in the 'no change' group that took place over the course of the evaluation was an attempt to direct resources more efficiently, but it had some costs for individuals who had benefited from participating in education or arts-based activity, even if it were unlikely to ever result in paid work. Intensification of services might have produced different results, but there are always going to be some logistical limits with respect to what resources are available and how they are allocated. Alongside this, findings that suggested that while programme objectives around labour market activation had not been achieved, quality of life had been improved by contact with the programme, raise questions around whether services promoting social interaction, community and friendship have intrinsic benefits for longer-term and recurrently homeless people.

There are some fundamental questions here which extend into wider social policy and employment policy, where populist ideas about 'working hard' and being rewarded with an adequate home, a sufficient income and a reasonable quality of life collide with realities of precarity, insecurity and relative and absolute poverty among many working people. Homelessness is often presented as a break with a society and economic system that will provide, if someone engages in the right way, for their social and economic needs (Parsell, 2018). However, as this research showed, there are situations in which working hard is not rewarded with socio-economic integration, where homeless people 'doing the right thing' are not always guaranteed a sustainable exit from homelessness.

The wider realities of a country like the UK are those of widespread in-work poverty, high reliance on welfare systems for populations for whom economic opportunities have become restricted by labour market change (OECD, 2017), and ultra-concentration of society's financial resources within tiny elites (Piketty, 2014). Large elements of the wider population, not just homeless people, have become characterised by housing precarity and after housing cost poverty as general inequality increases (Alston, 2018). Again, these wider structural issues are potentially important for something like the programme, because if general experience is that

finding relatively well-paid work and adequate, affordable housing is becoming more difficult, the challenges in socially integrating a group of currently and formerly homeless group of people may be that much more acute (Bretherton and Pleace, 2016; Pleace and Bretherton, 2017).

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