

Outreach Essentials Bitesize E-Learning

Active engagement in person-centred support and advocacy

Outreach is most effective when it is assertive. In practice, what that means is being persistent, creative and proactive in establishing a relationship of trust with the individuals you are trying to help. It also means not putting a time-limit on how long you will support someone.

Effective outreach is also [gender-informed](#) and takes into consideration the particular needs and behaviours of women experiencing homelessness. This could include providing support to women at times or locations that feel safe and accessible to them, outside of your standard outreach shift times.

The first time you approach someone sleeping rough it might be enough to establish who you are and offer the person you have approached the opportunity to ask you questions about how you might be able to help them.

Remember, you're a stranger approaching someone in the place that they consider safest - whether physically or mentally - for them at that time. You might not see it as an ideal location to be bedding down in, but you are entering into that person's space so tread carefully and respectfully.

If you're able to offer an indoor place of safety immediately, it can feel especially frustrating if the person sleeping rough doesn't feel able to accept that offer of help right away. But take a moment to think about things from their perspective. They don't know you, and you don't know how many times they have been left feeling let down by services in the past or why the place they are sleeping feels safe to them at that moment. It can take time to build trust, irrespective of what you're able to offer.

Consider the following scenario: Ian has been sleeping rough on the edge of some woods for about a year. Ian had a tenancy for a long time but lost it during a spell of poor mental health. He had been working for a big retail firm on a zero hours contract and when he was well he could usually work as many hours as he needed to cover all his rent and bills. But when he wasn't able to work due to his poor mental health he wasn't entitled to any sick pay and things spiralled out of control. When Ian finally went to the council for help the housing worker he spoke to seemed frustrated that Ian had left it until he had been served an eviction notice to ask for help. Why hadn't Ian applied for Universal Credit to help with his rent? But Ian had never been threatened with homelessness before and didn't

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know there might have been support available to him to help maintain his tenancy and prevent rent arrears. Ian's poor mental health also made his housing issues daunting to acknowledge and difficult to face up to.

When Ian eventually was eventually forced to leave his flat he went to the local authority again who were able to place him in a hostel. The space would be available in around 3 or 4 days so the housing officer suggested he stay with friends or family for a few days. Ian tried to find somewhere to sofa surf but was unsuccessful. So Ian spent the 3 nights he had to wait before moving in to hostel bedding down in a park. Sleeping rough was scary but the park was at least quiet and locked at night so Ian felt it was better than sleeping in a doorway.

Unfortunately, Ian found the hostel noisy and chaotic after living on his own for so long and his mental health deteriorated further. Ian tried to explain to a support worker why he didn't feel he could stay living at the hostel. But he got the impression he wasn't really being listened to and that they thought he was being a bit daft because any accommodation is surely better than being on the streets, and he'd get used to it eventually.

Ian didn't agree. He felt he had no option but to leave the hostel and started sleeping rough in more and more secluded locations. He didn't really have a plan and hadn't intended to sleep rough long term, but the longer he stayed in the quiet seclusion of the woods, the more he came to depend on it for his mental health and he started to make himself a bash out of old pallet wood and tarpaulin that he found abandoned here and there.

Ian comes into town occasionally and goes to a day centre where he has been able to get clothes and a new sleeping bag. Occasionally, in winter, he also has a hot meal. So, it was known that he was probably sleeping rough somewhere, but until recently no one knew where. Luckily, the parish council where the woods are located are active members of the local homelessness forum and when a dog walker mentioned they had seen someone living on the edge of the woods, a parish council member was able to make a referral to the outreach team.

Now imagine that you are the outreach worker trying to help Ian. Think about all the ways Ian might feel that in the past his needs have been disregarded, to the detriment of his mental health. At the moment, Ian has no reason to believe you'll be any different. This why taking the time to build a relationship with him is so important and why it is important for Ian to believe that there is potential for positive change.

Ian is just one example, and the same principle applies to everyone you work with. Women will often have very different experiences and needs to men. The experiences of people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds will vary. A generic one-size-fits-all approach to supporting rough sleepers will never be successful in the way a person-centred [advocacy-based](#) approach will.

Once you have started to develop a relationship and understood who someone is, their needs and the impact of any past relationships with services, then you can properly advocate for a solution that is appropriate and tailored to meet their needs.

On a practical level, being able to advocate effectively for everyone you are working to support away from the streets is also about understanding legal rights and entitlements. This means understanding current legislation and relevant frameworks such as housing legislation, adult safeguarding, the Care Act and, in some cases, what it means to have no recourse to public funds.

To make sure you are up to date and can advocate effectively the following resources are available online, free of charge:

- NHAS, the National Homeless Advice Service offer an extensive range of [free e-learning and pre-recorded training](#) on many elements of housing and homelessness legislation
- Shelter offer an essential online [guide to law for housing professionals](#)
- Homeless Link's [Knowledge Hub](#) provides detailed information on [safeguarding \(+bite-size e-learning\)](#), [care act and social care assessments](#) and a [gendered-lens framework](#) for delivering services for women, and
- Shelter and the NRPf network both offer guidance on [supporting people without recourse to public funds](#).

You will find links to all these resources in the transcript for this video.

Self-guided activities

Use the following self-guided activities to **individually**, think about a person you have worked with for a few weeks or months. Focus on your outreach approach, how and for how long you were able to support them, how you tailored solutions to fit their needs, and so on. Draw a timeline of your work with them. Describe where they were at when you first met them, where they are at now, and the highlights of your time working together. What did good days look like, and why?

What did bad days look like, and why? What worked well? What would you consider doing differently next time?

And **as a team**, bring your timelines and reflections to a team meeting or reflective practice session. Share and acknowledge where the team have supported men and women in ways that have had a positive impact on their situation. Think about any situations that team members found particularly challenging, or where there might not have been a positive outcome, and why. Are there any general themes you can draw from your discussions? Finally, think about the training resources from NHAS, Shelter, Homeless Link and the NRPF Network. How will you incorporate this into developing advocacy skills in your team?

Suggested action

Feedback the common themes from your team discussions to your service managers or commissioners. This will both demonstrate good practice and also show where investment in development could be made.