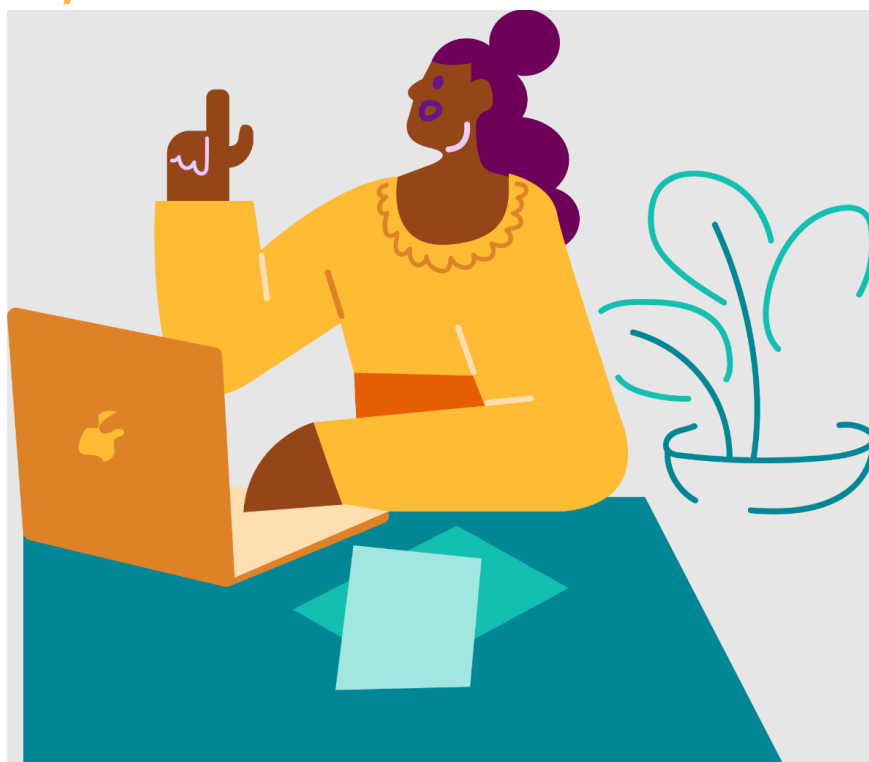


Supporting employment and volunteering opportunities for people with lived experience of homelessness and social exclusion

A quick reference guide for employers



Introduction

Purpose

This is a quick reference guide to provide some key dos, don'ts and top tips for employers who employ (or would like to employ) people who have lived experience. In this context, lived and living experience is focused on those who have experiences of homelessness and other social exclusions, although it is important to recognise that everyone has lived experiences, and it cannot and should not be too narrowly defined.

Workshop

The content for this guide was developed following a workshop hosted and facilitated by Homeless Link and Expert Citizens. Expert Citizens is a lived experience led organisation that established itself as a CIC in 2016.

The workshop was held in July 2024, with participants from a number of homelessness sector organisations across London. The workshop included people with and without lived experience of homelessness and social exclusion in both paid and voluntary roles and alumni who were part of Homeless Link's leadership programmes. The workshop was structured around four key areas of employing people with lived experience, including:

1. Motivations
2. Benefits
3. Challenges
4. Barriers

Discussions fell into four key themes of organisational culture, finances, training and development and support. Each of these themes are discussed below.

With thanks

With heartfelt thanks to all who supported and participated in the workshop to enable this guide to be developed.

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Overview

During the workshop, members of the group identified a wide range of benefits, for both employers and employees, of employing people with lived experience of homelessness and social exclusion. Some examples include:

Employer

- The opportunity for learning and to better understand the experiences of people being supported
- Providing a sense of grounding in the work
- Giving inspiration and a sense of hope
- Finding it rewarding to see others move on and change
- Creating unique connections for people being supported
- Promoting inclusivity and breaking down barriers and stigmas
- Generating different perspectives and opinions
- Bringing authenticity and credibility to the organisation
- Gaining a huge resource of knowledge and wisdom
- Supporting recruitment challenges

Employee

- Providing an income and a way to transition from welfare benefits
- Having a sense of purpose
- Keeping busy to support their recovery from homelessness
- Being the change - creating a path for others to follow
- Having skills and abilities recognised
- Being a role model
- Increasing and improving social networks
- Aiding career progression

People with experience of homelessness often also experience challenges with mental health and/or drug and alcohol conditions, and may have experienced exploitation and abuse, contact with criminal justice systems and high levels of social exclusion and loneliness. These can affect how people experience the world and trust others. Overcoming these challenges, or 'recovering from homelessness' takes different lengths of time, and varying levels of support, as each person is unique.

Organisational Culture

Dos, don'ts and top tips

Although there are significant benefits to employing people with lived experience, it is not something that should be done without a lot of thought and planning. A key consideration is the culture in the organisation and ensuring that from the point of recruitment to long-term employment, people with lived experience feel included, safe, valued and cared for.

Do...

- ✓ Consider your organisational policies and procedures and make changes to ensure they are fit for purpose. For example, it may be useful to consider how the organisation will support someone through a period of relapse e.g. mental health, drug and alcohol use etc.
- ✓ Involve all staff, specifically including HR, in conversations, planning and decision-making on employing people with lived experience.
- ✓ Consider peoples' prejudice and biases and invest in unconscious bias training.
- ✓ Have a clear Workplace Adjustment policy and process.
- ✓ Value volunteers as a key part of the organisation and offer responsibilities in line with this (a local volunteer centre may also be able to assist you with setting up and delivering a vibrant volunteer programme).

Don't...

- ✗ Have blanket policies around DBS checks. Take a person-centred approach and consider what is possible rather than what is not possible.
- ✗ Allow risk to be a barrier to employing people with lived experience. Consider safety and how to make it work.
- ✗ Create an 'us' and 'them' culture of people with or without disclosed lived experience.



Top Tips...

- Organisations should closely examine their motivations for employing people with lived experience – don't make it a tick box exercise. Consider all the ways

people with lived experience will enhance your organisation, from their skills and knowledge, to values and perspectives.

- Be aware of 'office banter' and make sure any inappropriate language or terms are called out.

Finances

Dos, don'ts and top tips

Money is a significant consideration for people who have been out of employment and reliant on the welfare system, and this transition needs to be considered by employers. In addition, people may not have the resources to purchase what they need for work such as clothes and footwear and employers may also need to consider this.

Do...

- ✓ Help someone to consider their finances and the changes which will be needed to move into paid work. Particular consideration will be needed for those in supported housing and in receipt of enhanced housing benefits. Be aware that specialist advice may be needed.
- ✓ Create an organisational policy on remunerating voluntary staff for their time and skills.

Don't...

- ✗ Create a lower pay scale for lived experience staff, which makes it unaffordable to work or forces someone to take on extra shifts to make ends meet.
- ✗ Make information overly complicated – use plain English and be clear about contracts, salaries and taxes.

Top Tips...

- A starter pack is invaluable for someone transitioning into work as additional costs for travel, food and clothing can be off-putting. The pack could include vouchers for food, advice on clothing schemes, toiletries and assistance with travel, haircuts and accessing dentistry.
- DWP offers a 'Flexible Support Fund' that can help with extra costs associated with getting a job, such as travel expenses, uniforms and clothing.

"If I went into employment, it meant I would have had to pay for the 'supported' element of the accommodation I was in, and it was unaffordable. That system affects so many people. They get trapped." – Staff member with lived experience of homelessness

Training and Development

Dos, don'ts and top tips

People with lived experience have a wide variety of skills and experience, but there can be a lot of anxiety around having the right skills for the job. Employing someone with lived experience means ensuring they have all the knowledge and tools they need to succeed.

Do...

- ✓ In addition to core training such as Safeguarding and Professional Boundaries, consider other fundamental skills like literacy and IT.
- ✓ Consider professional development and provide support to someone who may want to gain a qualification.
- ✓ Offer training in different formats to support different learning styles, for example, long classroom-based training may not work for some people.
- ✓ Consider [reverse mentoring](#) options.
- ✓ Embed training and qualifications into the service setting for clients, and also offer vocational qualifications for volunteers.

Don't...

- ✗ Make assumptions about someone's training needs: instead, create space for open conversations.



Top Tips...

- Speak to other organisations, there are lots of learning and development resources available. See training and development as a way for someone with lived experience to provide feedback – what's worked well and what they might recommend for the future.
- Homeless Link's [Skills Framework](#) offers different levels of competency which may help people understand the role and how they can progress.
- Homeless Link offer free job posting for roles recruiting people with lived experience on the [Jobs Board](#).
- National and local training providers may also offer 'fully funded' [training courses and qualifications](#).

Support

Dos, don'ts and top tips

Someone with lived experience moving into volunteering or employment requires ongoing support and employers should commit to that from the outset. It may be that an approach of 'elastic tolerance' is needed, where there is enhanced line management, access to additional support and a flexible approach used.

Do...

- ✓ Provide regular spaces for supervisions and check-ins to build trust and openness.
- ✓ Be clear about roles, responsibilities and expectations and have discussions about the training and development needed to meet this.
- ✓ Consider flexible working arrangements and allow additional time to attend appointments etc.
- ✓ Pay close attention to the impact of the work and be aware of signs of re-traumatisation.
- ✓ Consider coaching and mentoring to support people's development and wellbeing.

Don't...

- ✗ Assume that because someone is quiet that everything is OK – they may feel unable to speak up about concerns or issues.
- ✗ Ignore issues and allow problems to escalate – it may be possible to find a solution before things go too far.
- ✗ Ignore the elastic if it snaps! Be clear about red lines on behaviour and do terminate employment if this is broken, although this should be a last resort.
- ✗ Force someone into a role that is not suited to them – consider options and put the person's health and wellbeing at the forefront of decision-making.

Top Tips...

- Think about ways of creating space for decompression – this might be a half day per month away from work (outside of normal annual leave allowance) or making a quiet space available.
- Consider a phased introduction to the workplace as going into immediate full-time employment may not provide the time and space needed to meet ongoing support needs.
- Homeless Link offers [coaching and mentoring](#), including coaches with lived experience of homelessness.

Useful Resources

- A Fair Deal Guide, exploring fairness in social enterprises working with people experiencing homelessness (insights for best practice guide) - https://homelesslink-1b54.kxcdn.com/media/documents/Inclusive_Insight_-_A_Fair_Deal_Guide-2022-Web.pdf
- Homeless Link's Co-Production Toolkit, including guidance and resources to support organisations seeking to implement coproduction - <https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/co-production-toolkit/>
- Homeless Link's Involving and Recruiting People with Lived Experience, sharing the findings and learning from Homeless Link's Community of Practice series - <https://homeless.org.uk/knowledge-hub/involving-and-recruiting-people-with-lived-experience/>
- Evaluation of Fulfilling Lives: Supporting people experiencing multiple disadvantage – briefing on involving people with lived experience in the workforce- <https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/media/insights/documents/Involving-people-with-lived-experience-in-the-workforce-2020.pdf>
- Cardiff and Vale Partnership Board, a guide to employing people with lived experience - <https://cavrp.org/app/uploads/2023/03/Employing-people-with-lived-experience-1.pdf>
- Forward, a guide to employing ex-offenders and people with lived experience - <https://s34767.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/a-guide-to-employing-ex-offenders-and-people-with-lived-experience.pdf>
- Mind guide on involving people with lived experience of mental health problems in the design and delivery of your work - <https://www.mind.org.uk/media/7595/mind-mental-and-physical-activity-toolkit-guide-3.pdf>
- Career Matters, Lived Experience Charter - <https://www.career-matters.org/lived-experience-charter/>
- NHS Employers Toolkit: Recruiting people with experience of homelessness toolkit - <https://www.nhsemployers.org/toolkits/recruiting-people-experience-homelessness-toolkit>
- DWP Housing Benefit Guidance for supported housing claims: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/housing-benefit-guidance-for-supported-housing-claims/housing-benefit-guidance-for-supported-housing-claims>
- Groundswell: Exploring lived experience roles and stigma in the homelessness sector <https://groundswell.org.uk/2024/exploring-lived-experience-roles-and-stigma-in-the-homelessness-sector-2/>

What We Do

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for frontline homelessness services. We work to improve services through research, guidance and learning, and campaign for policy change that will ensure everyone has a place to call home and the support they need to keep it.

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Let's End Homelessness Together

