



City of Westminster

Research Workshop

How can outreach services be improved?

Westminster Rough Sleeping Commissioning Team

Riverside GROW trainees

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1. Introduction

In partnership with Riverside GROW trainees (Giving Real Opportunities for Work), the Westminster Rough Sleeping Commissioning Team ran a research workshop on the topic of outreach services. The aim of the workshop was to get a better understanding of how and why individuals choose to engage or not engage with outreach services. We hope the learning from this workshop will be used to influence how outreach support services are designed and delivered.

Co-Production

The Westminster Rough Sleeping Commissioning Team is keen to involve individuals with lived experience of homelessness in how we design and deliver our commissioned services. This research workshop was a small but significant piece of our wider aim for the co-production of rough sleeping and support services.

Methodology

We facilitated a research workshop with individuals who have lived experience of homelessness, and asked questions about three key areas of outreach work:

1. On the street contact
 - What are the impressions, beliefs and thoughts that affect someone's decision to engage with outreach (both positive and negative)?
 - For the negative – why is this negative and how can this be changed/improved, what should be done differently?
 - For the positive – why is this positive and how can we build on this?
2. Doing an initial assessment
 - What are the feelings and thoughts involved when doing an assessment
 - What behaviours and practices make a difference, good and bad?
3. Coming indoors
 - What are the biggest concerns for someone before coming off the street and taking the next step towards more stable accommodation?
 - How do/can outreach workers support people through this change?

Participants worked in small groups to discuss each area of questioning. The workshop was held at Westminster City Hall and 10 people attended.

Who We Spoke With

	Gender	Age	Time spent sleeping rough	Current accommodation
1	M	46 - 50	2 years or more	Night shelter/Rough sleeping
2	M	46 - 50	1-2 years	Rough sleeping
3	M	41-45	2 years or more	Hostel
4	M	56 – 60	Less than 6 months	Short term flat share
5	M	36 - 40	Prefer not to say	Own flat
6	M	56 – 60	2 years or more	Own flat
7	M	41 - 45	6 months – 12 months	Hostel
8	F	N/D*	Less than 6 months	Own flat
9	F	36-40	2 years or more	Night shelter/Rough sleeping
10	B	41-45	Prefer not to say	Prefer not to say
*N/D – non disclosed, B – Binary				

2. Workshop Findings

An initial anonymous exercise to gauge the opinion of the room showed an overall positive perception of outreach services; words like *helpful, kind, caring* and *friendly* dominated. The less positive words included *intrusive* and *'us and them'* and someone wrote the word *money*, suggesting an understanding that money is one of the drivers of services.

2.1. On the Street Contact

The groups discussed both positive and negative perceptions and experiences of meeting outreach services on the streets. The responses can be grouped into two areas of concern: 1) developing relationships of trust, and 2) the importance of a genuine offer of help.

Developing relationships of trust

Trust was discussed as being essential in terms of encouraging someone to talk to and work with outreach services. In particular, participants said that consistent 1-1 support made all the difference for keeping them engaged, and made them feel cared for and encouraged.

"Working with them can put you on the right direction, and they give you hope"

Some participants said that their individual experiences showed that there was good communication within outreach teams; for example, if they were approached by multiple different outreach workers each of the workers knew their names.

However, the experience of 'unfulfilled promises' and misinformation was really detrimental to that engagement.

"I was told to wait and meet someone on the steps outside the church and wait there – and I waited there 5 days in a row and nobody came. And then they said – oh, we came, but that wasn't true because I was waiting there."

Participants suggested that outreach workers might not always have the time to give on-going 1-1 support, however making promises and not keeping them creates a strong feeling of mistrust.

"If you have one bad experience, people can shut down."

Moreover, there was a feeling that some aspects of the outreach services were unfair. For example, they felt that clients might be 'cherry picked' because they were easier to work with or because of some personal preference. Participants said that individuals who were sleeping in the night centre would get better privileges.

"You go to the day centre in the morning to have shower and there is already a long queue of people who just came out of the night centre."

Overall, it was clear that developing a relationship of trust defined by clear expectations, consistency, and fulfilled promises can make all the difference to keep individuals engaged. Importantly, the group agreed that it helps if outreach workers have a good understanding of what it is like to sleep on the streets and can understand people's psychologies.

"It's easier to deal with staff who have been through the same situation."

“(individuals) need to trust them and they need to be able to believe what (outreach) are saying. (Outreach) should be embracing peer educators, they need to understand people’s illnesses – we’re not bad people – they need more training up about psychology.”

It was noted that people sleeping on the streets fear the loss of their street community if they move indoors and so outreach workers need to find ways to make people feel safe and supported. This should include fun activities and stimulation to help *“prove to yourself that you can do something.”*

The offer of help

Participants agreed that their decision to engage with outreach a worker was helped by the fact that outreach were able to link individuals in with other support services and charities. Many participants said that they engaged with outreach services specifically to get help for their health needs.

“Once I started working with them, other agencies fell into place.”

“The help is there – this is the better side of what’s offered due to health needs.”

Outreach workers were also able to help people to obtain their ID and benefits, and to find accommodation.

“You get messed about, or the Job Centre messes you about – a lot of people aren’t on benefits. The paperwork is daunting and this can be a barrier to getting into a hostel.”

Because there are a many benefits to engaging with outreach, participants suggested that access to the day centre needs to be leveraged as an opportunity to engage people. However, it is important that outreach workers create realistic expectations from the start about the help that is available.

“They need to press the message – if you progress with your behaviour you will have access to warm clothing and food.”

In situations where no apparent help was being offered, participants defined interactions with outreach workers as intrusive and persistent. For example, participants asked why they would get woken up in the middle of the night with what seemed like no real reason.

“They’d wake you up and just say, hi, that’s you, ok, and walk off. It was pointless, they didn’t even offer anything.”

Participants shared that this practice of constantly being woken up with no apparent reason felt condescending and disrespectful, and described outreach workers as *“busy bodies”* or *“patronising professionals”* at times. Many participants said that these kinds of experiences fuelled negative messages about outreach services on the street and this bad reputation had an impact on whether or not they chose to engage with services.

Overall, the group agreed that a genuine and targeted offer of help was critical to encouraging engagement. In the end, many participants said they had taken up the offer of help because of poor health or out of a feeling of desperation.

2.2. Doing an initial assessment

In groups, participants discussed the feelings and thoughts involved in preparing for/doing an initial assessment with an outreach worker. Again, the responses to this question can be grouped into two

areas; 1) assessments should be done in a personalised way and with emotional understanding, and 2) the importance of clarity, accountability and consistency around expectations.

Emotional understanding and personalisation

Participants explained that a lot of emotions can be brought up during an assessment. For this reason, it is particularly important for outreach workers to understand and know how to manage emotional conversations in a delicate way.

“It’s like opening up a box of worms – it’s quite emotional and (outreach workers) need to know how to shut it down in a respectful way.”

“Outreach workers are not therapists.”

Some of the emotions mentioned were nervousness, excitement and in particular, fear. This included the fear of being ‘looked down on’ or judged, and the fear/insecurity of not know how the information could be used.

“You’re thinking - is any of the information I divulge going to be shared with other agencies, i.e. police? What if I say something and it gets me in trouble?”

Similarly, the workers’ approach and kinds of questions they ask can be off-putting if not managed in a transparent and delicate way.

“It can feel like a police interrogation, so you wonder, is it safe?”

Overall, participants agreed that because each person has their own emotional histories outreach assessments need to be personalised to each individual, with an understanding of the emotions they are experiencing. This personalisation should also be around when and where assessments happen to help make the individual feel safe and comfortable. Some participants expressed that the environment in the day centre put them off wanting to come in to do assessments.

“They should have floating support workers that can go out and do assessments – it needs less pressure to go to the day centre.”

“When you have an appointment – being on the road, a lot of times you forget, so why don’t outreach phone or find you?”

“They need to understand that every client has personalised needs – it’s not one shoe fits all. I’d rather do it sitting in the park. Some people want tranquillity, they don’t want chaos.”

Clarity, accountability and consistency

Because of the emotional sensitivity involved, participants explained that it would help to know what to expect from outreach workers and what is expected of them. This was tied back to the ‘us and them’ thinking; that outreach workers as ‘them’ might have an agenda that is hidden from ‘us’.

“Has to be respectful – no manipulation.”

Someone mentioned that they would like to see a 'charter of expectations' to clearly outline expectations. While participants recognised that there is currently a document similar to this in the CSTM Day Centre, it could be improved if it clearly stated what the expectations are on both sides.

"As long as you engage, we will help you do..."

This emphasis on expectations was followed up with the need for accountability and consistency. Participants shared their experiences of having been misinformed about the purpose of the assessment and/or what can be expected to happen next.

"What are the pros/cons of doing an assessment? How and when am I going to see results?"

"Is the assessor going to be a constant in my life? Is it on-going? Am I going to be let down?"

"Five different people give five different answers."

This expression of not knowing what happens next and/or what the information might be used for ties back to the importance of being able to trust outreach workers and being respected. Doing an assessment involves a lot of emotions and personal divulgence so individuals need to trust that the information will be used in the right way and that any promises made will be kept.

"Is the information correct, what they're putting in? I had one guy write all this stuff and I saw it later - it wasn't even right."

"There is a lot of fear for showing up to an appointment. You know, they're setting appointments at set times and then making them wait for twenty minutes. If a customer is late they get penalised, but not vice versa."

2.3. Coming indoors

Finally, the group discussed the experience of getting emotionally prepared to come off the streets and move into an accommodation option. This was described as an experience involving a range of emotions, from insecurity/fear of the unknown to personal insecurity and the fear of failure. Responses have been group into two areas; 1) feeling personally unconfident or incapable to move indoors, and 2) the need to know what you are getting into.

Lack of personal confidence and feeling incapable

"Sleeping on the streets is like having an excluded lifestyle. I describe it to people like a 'mezzanine existence', you know what that is – it's like you're living in the gaps."

For everyone in the room, they described living on the streets as a lifestyle. Living on the streets, you can develop a community around you, you can become 'comfortable with the way things are' and you can develop your own 'strategy for survival'. Moving indoors means facing the loss of that community and participants described this change as a form of 'disempowerment'.

"You have to leave your comfort zone – you have a circle of friends and a certain lifestyle – and it can be lonely leaving your friends behind."

"On the streets, you have a strategy for surviving, and this is being taken away."

This feeling of 'disempowerment' and changing the 'survival strategy' was described as being quite scary because individuals might feel like they are not equipped to take this step.

"You move from managing your own situation and then being reliant on other services."

"Some people can be scared of stability. You know, they wonder, what if I can't manage?"

"Success is the scariest thing of all. If I succeed at something then I have something to lose."

There are clearly quite complicated feelings of fear, loss, and personal insecurity that are involved in this step. Participants suggested that outreach workers could help individuals prepare for the shift in 'survival strategy' by helping them to feel empowered for the move.

"Outreach workers could provide some kind of coaching – like the language you use and how you present yourself – strategies one can learn for engaging with professionals. It's very easy to turn someone around – they might think one way about you, but they can be turned around in minutes."

Some participants felt that the information that gets shared between outreach and accommodation services can be incorrect or inaccurate and that this might have an impact on whether or not they succeed in accommodation.

"The referral information can be dishonest, because they don't want you to sound difficult."

"When they're passing over the information – somewhere along the lines it gets diluted."

Overall, the group felt that it was important for outreach workers to understand these feelings and find ways to help them feel prepared for this move into the unknown.

What am I getting into?

On top of the emotions about personal capability, participants explained that individuals can and do feel nervous about what life in accommodation will be like. If it is shared hostel accommodation living with other residents, there can be anxiety about who else is in the same project. Having information about what the hostel will be like and what to expect makes a difference for helping someone to feel less anxious.

"You can be fearful of living with other chaotic residents, so there needs to be education and understanding of what that's like"

Participants expressed that someone can be helped to feel more comfortable if they understand what kind of support they will be offered.

"Will there be after care? Is it going to be consistent one-to-one, on-going support?"

Having access to peer support was highlighted as an important draw for someone to feel more at ease.

"They can be 'patronising professionals' – someone might prefer identifying with peer workers, you know, they speak their language."

Having access to a diversity of fun activities that can help someone to develop skills and confidence is also appealing. Activities such as Build-a-Bike and the Recovery College provide stimulation and an opportunity for engagement outside of the traditional support model.

“It shouldn’t be just routines and tasks that limit the opportunity for engagement. They should also have recreational options – positive activities to promote wellbeing – courses and education.”

It is worth recognising what an individual’s interests and strengths are and taking these into consideration when trying to find a suitable accommodation offer. There needs to be sufficient focus on how to motivate people to stay engaged once they move indoors.

“People also need to self-advocate – developing new skills and confidence.”

“You want to try to give something back when you’ve been helped.”

3. Conclusion and Recommendations

This research workshop was a valuable opportunity to hear from service users what their experience of engaging with outreach services has been like and most importantly to glean suggestions from them about how we can build on and improve the approach being taken.

Themes of trust, respect, clarity, emotional awareness, accountability and consistent messaging run throughout the findings. Especially the need to recognise that individuals are just that, *individuals*, each with their own unique histories, aspirations and interests. This recognition must be woven into how support interventions are designed and offered.

Recommendations

In line with the workshop discussions and findings, the following recommendations are proposed for enhancing the outreach service offer in an impactful way:

- 1. Increased and sustained peer involvement:** Building relationships of trust and understanding has been identified as critical to encouraging and sustaining positive engagement. The use of peer outreach workers and advocates, such as Street Buddies and Groundswell peer advocates, is an excellent start and we are clearly only scratching the surface in terms of the 'power of peers'. If an individual has developed a good relationship with a peer outreach worker and made the decision to come indoors, we recommend that the power of this positive relationship be continued through to the accommodation placement where possible. This would also support the continued development of peer workers who can receive a sense of fulfilment by following the story through from the street to accommodation.
- 2. Strategic communication with periphery support services to ensure a consistent message:** Individuals living on the streets have the opportunity to come into contact with a huge volume of services. Outreach service providers should conduct a mapping exercise of these services and develop a communication strategy for how to manage the message being shared with individuals from each of those services. To avoid miscommunication or unintended 'false promises' it is critical that services and individuals know what help is realistically available and on offer in Westminster.

3. **Targeted training for working in a psychologically informed way and managing delicate conversations:** As one participant put it, the assessment process can be “like opening up a box of worms”. Most people wouldn’t like to share their deepest, darkest secrets with strangers, particularly if it feels like a test or interview. We are aware that outreach services have made some positive strides in terms of training on psychologically informed ways of working, and the KUF training has been rolled out widely across Westminster. This must remain a cornerstone feature of outreach support services, and be reviewed regularly to account for staff turnover.
4. **Bringing down barriers around paperwork and assessments:** It is clear that the assessment process and preparing for a move indoors can be very emotionally difficult for an individual. Many individuals need to get their benefit claims sorted out and the paperwork associated with this can be daunting, off-putting and lead to disengagement. However, it is necessary for someone to have an active claim before they can move into a Westminster hostel.

We recommend that if someone is engaging well but feeling put off by the level of paperwork required then we need to support their move indoors however possible before disengagement happens. Outreach workers can advocate on behalf of individuals, providing whatever assurances possible to hostels to agree a swift move in. The priority needs to be getting people indoors.

5. **Coaching people for the move indoors:** From the workshop findings, it is clear that people can get anxious about moving into a hostel; concerns about what it will be like, what support will be available and how they will cope with other residents. We recommend that, being mindful of this hesitation, outreach workers need to 1) 'sell' the hostel to individuals and 2) find ways of coaching people in preparation for the move.

With this in mind, the Rough Sleeping Commissioning Team have supported the development of 1-pagers for each of the hostels in our pathway to help outreach workers understand the pathway offer and better explain this to individuals (<http://www.westminsterhcp.org/hostels.htm>). This is just the start, and we welcome innovative ideas for 'selling' the accommodation offer to individuals.

Outreach services need to develop approaches for ensuring that people receive the personalised support and coaching to prepare them for a smooth and successful move indoors. It could even start with having a conversation about someone’s ‘survival strategy’ and how this will come into play when they move indoors, to mitigate the feeling of having the ‘rug pulled out from under you’ so to speak.

Future research

This research is part of a longer term initiative of co-production – seeking to actively involve service users in the production of services. It is our intention that it will form the groundwork for a peer research programme to enable the continued and active involvement of individuals with lived experiences of homelessness in understanding, evaluating and improving the way we offer services.

We are happy to report that each one of the individuals who participated in this research expressed their interest in being involved in future research initiatives.

Thank you to each of our incredible participants for giving their time and for boldly sharing their experiences.

Authors:

Liz Gallou egallou@westminster.gov.uk
Darryl Bridges Darryl.Bridges@riverside.org.uk