

The importance of trust on the frontline

#walkthefrontline



Michael Stickland, Head of Partnerships at Shelter, went on to the front line with Birmingham Changing Futures' Lead Worker Peer Mentor team.

The Lead Worker Peer Mentor service engages with people with some of the most entrenched behaviour patterns, a result of struggling to cope with interconnected challenges including mental ill health and homelessness. “Expecting these people to engage in a way that suits the service provider is unrealistic. It’s often incredibly difficult for them to trust and for many, past trauma means their lives today can be chaotic. The team at Shelter make the office welcoming and accessible, but even then, just walking into it can feel daunting. The Lead Worker Peer Mentor service is modelling a new, proven approach to supporting people on their own terms.”

Peer Mentors have lived experience. Many have experiences almost identical to those they are working with. It means they have a deep understanding of the service user, their decision-making processes and the support they need. This insight and the approach developed as a result permeates the whole team.

Instead of expecting people living chaotic lives to attend pre-agreed appointments in Shelter’s office, from where the Lead Worker Peer Mentor service is operated, the team goes out on the streets to engage with service users. “I went out with a Lead Worker,” explained Michael. “We set off to find a specific service user, a young man with special educational needs and autism made homeless by the death of his carer. He is incredibly vulnerable. We wanted to talk about temporary accommodation but, on this occasion, couldn’t find him. It’s frustrating, but highlights the challenges. Without stability, it’s incredibly difficult to engage; but the Lead Workers and Peer Mentors won’t give up.

“We made good use of the time, though, engaging with other service users. We met a couple the Lead Worker had supported into accommodation several years ago. For all sorts of reasons, including potential mental ill health, they no longer lived there, now sleeping in a doorway. Trust is a huge issue for them. They had been misunderstood so often in the past, they’d lost trust and had not engaged with service providers for about three years.

“Connecting with them as human beings, not ‘homeless people’ was really important. My colleague asked what they

wanted and what support they needed, then listened carefully to their answers. He made no promises or grand claims, but he did challenge, asking how ready they were for change and would they meet the team half way? Change won’t be immediate, but he has begun the process of re-building their trust.

“Seeing things from the perspective of the service user is essential to change outcomes. People in recovery from substance misuse might struggle to live with people who are still using and, for those with serious anxiety, living in a doorway might feel a much safer option compared to sharing accommodation with people they don’t know. The Lead Worker Peer Mentor model embeds these insights at the heart of service provision, making a positive difference to outcomes.”

The Birmingham Changing Futures Together Programme

Funded by The Big Lottery, Birmingham Changing Futures Together improves the effectiveness of service provision to those with multiple and complex needs (homelessness, substance misuse, offending behaviour and mental health) by creating a ‘community of support’ comprising organisations in the sector, identifying and sharing best practice and establishing new approaches.

No Wrong Door Network

At the heart of the Changing Futures approach, the No Wrong Door Network is a group of organisations working together to ensure service users can access a whole system of support through one referral. A team of Engagement and Development Workers, offer one-to-one time with Experts when working on a Personal Development Impact Plan, which supports their development within the programme.

Lead Work Peer Mentor

Our dedicated Lead Workers, skilled in helping people navigate the support services available, work alongside Peer Mentors with lived experience. This unique combination creates a tailored and empathetic approach, which bridges the gap between services and those who use them.

Contact the BVSC Birmingham Changing Futures Together team for more information.

www.changingfuturesbham.co.uk