



PATHWAYS TO ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL ACTIVITY

**Crisis submission to DWP in response
to 'Opportunity for All'**

October 2005

At Crisis we continue to focus on enabling people with a history of homelessness to transform their lives from dependency and exclusion to economic and social inclusion.

The UK's sustained economic growth is unprecedented in the modern economy. Unemployment has been cut by 2 million, with employment levels now at a record high. The benefits of this economic growth, however, have not reached the homeless. Over the last twenty years unemployment amongst the homeless has risen from 17% to 95%.

As the UK looks to compete in the modern world the economy is increasingly high skill and high knowledge. With the homeless suffering from disproportionately poor basic skills the distance to sustainable employment increases, the threat of long-term exclusion rises and the need for effective, positive and ambitious public policy intervention becomes undeniable.

At Crisis we believe the 7th edition of "Opportunity for All" recognises this and we are keen to work with the DWP as the strategy is developed and delivered. At the launch David Blunkett kindly asked for innovative ideas, which help deliver the aims of the DWP. Please find the Crisis contribution attached.

We understand that homelessness is often a manifestation of other forms of social exclusion and many of the solutions we outline would be equally appropriate for other disadvantaged groups. In order to pool together expertise we are increasingly working with organisations that represent people from across the range of the socially excluded, including people with mental health problems, the disabled and ex-offenders.

Shaks Ghosh
Crisis Chief Executive

Crisis Skylight – A Pathway to Economic and Social Activity

At Crisis we believe economic and social activity create the most effective pathway out of homelessness. For many homeless people, however, we find that paid work is rarely an immediate option (although with over 90% wanting to work it is a realistic longer-term ambition for many). The 1st step into learning is often key to eventual economic and social activity.

Our Skylight activity centre provides a series of practical, creative, life-skills and well-being classes for homeless people. Users pick and choose classes of interest to them and attend as and when they please. The result is increased confidence, self-esteem and desire to participate. The atmosphere is deliberately participatory and flexible, not formulaic. Skylight is strong in peer example, with classes open to people of mixed ability and the centre staffed largely by volunteer users working in conjunction with experienced project workers. The aim is to give opportunity to help others, to create a sense of responsibility and structure, and to develop social capital.

Based in our activity centre is the Crisis progression worker. Their role is to tap into the users increasing desire to participate, provide one-to-one support and encourage users to take steps to develop and follow career goals.

As part of this next step, Crisis is currently piloting the Skylight Learning Zone in preparation for its formal launch in January 2006. The Learning Zone offers structured learning for homeless people and is funded partly by the Learning and Skills Council. All courses can lead to qualification, including the qualifications developed as part of the Homelessness Sector Pilot. The objective is clear, to increase the basic skills of the students and improve employability.

Skylight also runs a social enterprise café. Here homeless people have the opportunity to learn on the job, in a pre-employment environment. The demands of the successful café are as they would in any other successful café. However, support and time is built into the training structure to allow the opportunity to deal with any other problems, which inevitably arise as a result of the homeless lifestyle.

In addition the Skylight Café helps to overcome barriers of discrimination. Employers can be unwilling to employ a person with a history of homelessness, fearing them as unreliable. The Skylight Café was

established and has developed in partnership with private organisations. These organisations are confident that job applicants, who have worked in our Café, are ready for sustainable employment. Participation and confidence in our training scheme reduces the risk employers face in the recruitment process. Early referral would undermine confidence in our Café and would not be in the interest of the trainees.

The fundamental lessons of Crisis Skylight include:

- the need for 1st steps learning (or meaningful activity) which re-engage the disengaged without unrealistic early demands undermining participation and confidence;
- the value of peer mentoring and volunteering at providing inspiration, a sense of responsibility and structure;
- the effectiveness of a progression worker at channelling enthusiasm towards career goals;
- a requirement for structured learning leading to qualification, which increase basic skills and employability;
- the success of intermediate or pre-employment 'on the job' training at creating the circumstances which make sustainable employment possible.

The ideas, principles and holistic nature of our Skylight project make it one of the most exciting and innovative initiatives of its type, however, it is not the only example. For instance, currently across the UK there are a number of ESF EQUAL projects seeking to tackle economic and social inactivity within disadvantaged groups.

There is no overall strategic approach to the delivery of these projects, however, and there remains a chronic lack of provision, which requires public policy intervention by Government. With around 50% of homeless people having no or poor basic skills an ad-hoc approach to re-engagement in learning, skills and employability is not sufficient in preventing people being excluded from the labour market and from active inclusion.

A Nationwide Learning and Skills Programme

We recommend Government invest in regional / local bodies, which commission initiatives that re-engage in learning and improve employability, so enabling access to sustainable employment for those that can work and increased social inclusion for those that can't.

The regional / local commissioning bodies would provide strategic leadership through:

- Mapping what is needed in their area, looking at demographics, diversity, skill levels and economic need;
- Commissioning a multi-faceted network of learning, skills and employability programmes, which adapt to the multiple needs of the users;
- Ensuring a sufficient supply of places, including room for the expansion and development of successful projects;
- Providing project autonomy to allow innovation but support and guidance to improve standards, and decisive intervention to turn around under performing projects;
- Co-ordinating a new duty to seek out vulnerable people so ensuring even the hardest to reach are re-engaged;
- Acting as broker, to create synergy between projects and business, particularly in pre-employment / intermediate employment projects, and to help establish an insurance fund initially endowed by large organisations then 'topped up' by companies benefiting from its impact, which pays out to companies that suffer losses as a result of employing a vulnerable person.

A New Deal for the Homeless

The needs of people with a history of homelessness are often multiple. In addition they are less likely to possess the information needed to navigate through public services effectively. Dozens of agencies can be involved at any one time, each working independent of the other, sometimes replicating work and often failing to resolve the problems. So economic and social inactivity perpetuates.

We recommend a new duty to seek out the vulnerable. Each person identified should work with one lead professional who is tasked to join up the different agencies – housing, health, work, etc – personalise the service and ensure that time and resource are directed towards the long-term goal of sustainable economic and social activity. This lead professional must be equipped to understand the particular needs of their client and given the freedom and capacity to do what is right for their client.

Reform the Benefits System

The availability of housing benefit can make housing affordable to many who could otherwise not afford to rent any accommodation. However, current arrangements can actually restrict access to the private rented sector, can cause people to leave home before they are ready, can act as a disincentive to work and can impede efforts to improve educational qualifications and employability.

Crisis recommend:

- The 'Single Room Rent' Restriction is abolished as it prevents access to private sector rented accommodation for under 25's. This can create un-stable housing conditions so undermining efforts to take up training and employment.
- The benefit run-on scheme is extended to include those who have been on Income Support or Jobseeker's Allowance for four weeks and the five-week minimum job duration condition should be removed, so acknowledging casual work as a step towards sustainable employment;
- The block grant solution used in the Working Futures pilot should be extended to include all single homeless people living in temporary accommodation such as hostels, for whom work does not pay because of excessive rent;
- The 1st housing benefit payment should be paid in advance - as practiced by some local authorities - in order to improve access, simplify administration, improve security for landlords and tenants, and help prevent people getting into debt;
- The 16 hour rule should be abolished to avoid people being deterred from studying because they will lose their entitlement to benefit;

The non-dependent deduction should be either abolished altogether, or a flat rate introduced, acknowledging that working non-dependants should contribute towards housing costs. This would prevent pressure being put on young people to leave home and either claim Housing Benefit elsewhere or to become homeless.

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