

## New approach at the DWP transforms engagement

**Birmingham Changing Futures Together's helps Birmingham's most vulnerable citizens live more fulfilled lives by identifying and sharing best practice in service provision.**

### Multi-organisational support

With entrenched behaviour patterns this group, who experience two or more multiple and complex people needs (mental health, substance misuse, offending behaviour and homelessness), finds it difficult to trust and engage with services. Changing Futures is pioneering new ways of working to address this challenge, in particular the involvement of people with lived experience in the design and delivery of services, and arguing for the learning to become mainstream across all services.

The Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) in Birmingham has incorporated the learning into a new model of service provision for this vulnerable group and achieved improved outcomes. Lived experience is now integral, with an Outreach Work Coach working alongside Changing Futures' Peer Mentors in locations service users feel safe, and Peer Mentors sharing their insight with Work Coaches in Jobcentres across the city. Continuing to evolve its engagement with Lived Experience, the DWP is also now trialling a Peer Mentor present in a Jobcentre to support individuals in situ.

"Based in the Jobcentres across the city, our team wants to support people," explained Michelle Wilson Partnership Manager at the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP). "But when those people are the city's most vulnerable, this is challenging and complex. Working collaboratively with Peer Mentors in Shelter, St Basils and SIFA Fireside, we are evolving our approach, building the trust of people with multiple and complex needs and, as a result, helping them get the support they need to transform their lives."

Barry Jones is an Outreach Work Coach at the DWP, operating on site in Shelter, Sifa Fireside and St Basils, all of which are part of the Birmingham Changing Futures Together Core Partnership. He works closely with Peer Mentors, who have lived experience. They understand the vulnerable individual's perspective and know many of the triggers they experience and so can build trust quickly. Barry is trusted by extension. "I am an important link, almost a bridge of trust."

He has seen first-hand the positive impact of taking the time to build the trust of people with complex needs and entrenched behaviour patterns since starting to work alongside Peer Mentors at Shelter in May 2019. Present where the individual feels safe, Barry can get the information needed to provide the person with

the right support. "I am privileged because I can spend the time I need to help, even up to and beyond an hour and a half. It gives me the space to really brief them on what's going to happen in the Jobcentre, who they'll see and the procedures they'll have to follow."

The consistency of Barry's presence is important. "Because, for example, everyone knows I'm at Shelter in the afternoon, Peer Mentors and Support Workers encourage people to drop in. I know they won't be able to manage a precise time so, present all afternoon, I can be flexible."

He continued: "People being supported by Shelter are often in crisis, they are at their most vulnerable. Their life experience means it's difficult for them to trust 'the system'. They don't give the Jobcentre team the full story, so problems don't come to light until they are extreme. For example, a failure to attend DWP appointments could mean Universal Credit is not paid and rent arrears accumulate, but they say nothing. Only when eviction seems certain do they finally tell their support worker. Tackling the problems much earlier makes things better for everyone. Based in a space they feel comfortable I can help address concerns straight away."

The approach is delivering results. An individual came into Shelter seeking help with imminent eviction. Shelter's legal team got a delay in the eviction hearing and Barry used the time to sort payment. The individual received £10,000 in rent arrears and stayed in their home.

Barry can share valuable knowledge with the Jobcentre teams. "I can flag someone to the Jobcentre as vulnerable so instead of logging a no show when they don't make an appointment, our team can look at possible causes for concern. We can feedback to their Peer Mentor, who can go out and look for the person and help them re-connect. This way we avoid crises."



Peer Mentors and Experts by Experience, who also have lived experience, have deepened the insight of the Jobcentre teams. Jobcentre Work Coaches have been trained by Peer Mentors and Experts, learning about their stories and life experiences. “the vulnerable individuals have ‘come to life’ in the Jobcentres – they are real people, not just unknown names on the computer screen,” explained Michelle.



We see why a person who is homeless, has mental ill health, a criminal record or experienced substance misuse, could feel intimidated walking into a Jobcentre and how that feeling of fear could translate into difficult behaviour.



“I might once have thought that if you’ve been offered housing the problem is fixed, but I’m much more aware of the challenges now. If I was vulnerable and someone told me tomorrow to move to a part of the city I don’t know, where I don’t know anyone, I wouldn’t want to go. We know prevention is better than cure and that getting it right for someone who’s homeless takes time.

“We’re also able to be more flexible now. Traditionally, a support worker might book the Jobcentre appointment but, because the vulnerable person feels anxious and often lives a chaotic life, they don’t turn up. Recognising this challenge, we can schedule appointments thoughtfully. We now know lots of appointments on different days is too much so can schedule everything on one day if needed. Jobcentre staff will also try to adapt their diary to suit if possible.

“We now have a homeless conversation in the first appointment. Are they living in temporary accommodation or sofa surfing? How long is this likely to last? With the right information we can put in place easements. For example, if they’re sofa surfing, getting a permanent roof over their head is the priority, not getting a job. We agree their commitment is to find secure accommodation and only once that’s done do we focus on job hunting.”

Every Jobcentre now has a Work Coach with specialist understanding of homelessness. Each has shadowed Barry at Shelter and St Basils, building relationships with the Peer Mentors to learn more about the issues. In turn, they are educating other Work Coaches, spreading the new philosophy within the DWP.

The DWP’s engagement with Peer Mentors is continuing to evolve. As part of Housing First, a Peer Mentor is now in Sparkhill Jobcentre two hours every week. On site, Derek is able to engage directly with people with complex needs, helping them to build their confidence in the system and navigate it effectively. The result is a better outcome for everyone, particularly vulnerable people who, with the right support, can lead fulfilled lives.

Contact the BVSC Birmingham Changing Futures Together team for more information.  
[www.changingfuturesbham.co.uk](http://www.changingfuturesbham.co.uk)

## The Birmingham Changing Futures Together Programme

Funded by The National Lottery Community Fund, Birmingham Changing Futures Together improves the effectiveness of service provisions 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.

### The No Wrong Door Network

At the heart of the Changing Futures approach, the No Wrong Door Network comprises service providers committed to collectively working together so users benefit from better connected support. People experiencing two or more multiple and complex needs get the support they need ‘in the moment’. Safe and looked after, they are able to move away from the immediate risk of crisis.

### Inreach Outreach

Often the best person to talk to is someone with similar experiences so our trained staff with Lived Experience partner with Experts by Experience to take information to services directly where the clients are, crisis point organisations where they may fall through the gaps.

### Every Step of the Way

The service is delivered by Birmingham MIND and is a service user involvement workstream, and part of the wider programme, Birmingham Changing Futures Together. The service provides encouragement and enables Experts by Experience to get involved in a range of opportunities within the programme, which in turn contributes to systems change.

### No Wrong Door Navigator

The service provides hands-on support to service users, accompanying them to the right door, wherever they present. Standing by their side, the Navigators also support service users to attend their referral appointments and advocate on their behalf to ensure they are treated with dignity and respect.

