



CENTREPOINT EMPLOYER BEST PRACTICE GUIDE:

EFFECTIVELY SUPPORTING HOMELESS YOUNG PEOPLE INTO EMPLOYMENT

**CENTRE
POINT**

**ENDING YOUTH
HOMELESSNESS**

Contents

Introduction and methods	4
Working in partnership	5
Improve access to work for homeless young people	6
Provide opportunities for those with limited work experience	6
Ensure interview practices are inclusive	7
Embed understanding and flexibility into the organisation	7
Support young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness	8
Offer formal and informal wellbeing support	8
Offer peer support for new starters	9
Provide financial support to those in need	9
Have clear complaints and whistleblowing processes	10
Provide training & development opportunities	10
Be part of the movement to end youth homelessness	11

Centrepoint would like to express gratitude to all the young people and employers who shared their knowledge and experience to support the creation of this guide. The employers that have contributed have different employment practices and have not necessarily implemented all of the suggestions outlined in this guide. However, Centrepoint commends the work they are doing to support homeless young people into employment, both through their practical work and support of homelessness organisations. A special thank you to our steering group members for their invaluable contributions in shaping the guide: Benjamin Cook Quang, Benjamin Treloar, Georgina Cornagliotto & Toni-Ann Gurdon.

Foreword

I have seen the devastating impact that unemployment has on the lives of the homeless young people we support. At Centrepoint we know that employers play a pivotal role in ensuring that young people can access and thrive in employment. Centrepoint works with and is supported by a host of employers every year, many of whom provide vital work opportunities to the young people we support. We now need more employers to recruit young people who have experienced homelessness and support them to move up the career ladder.

Youth unemployment and economic inactivity represent a major drag on our economy and significant factors driving the historically high rates of youth homelessness in the UK. Between June and August 2024, there were 576,000 young people aged 16 to 24 who were unemployed, an increase of nearly 8 per cent from the previous year. A considerable number of these young people will be facing homelessness. It is therefore a sobering fact that the UK economy consequently loses between £5.4 – 6 billion every year.

To end youth homelessness, it is vital that vulnerable young people are able to access employment. At Centrepoint, we provide young people with the opportunities and tools that they need to complete their education, gain crucial skills and prepare for a career. Our jobs & education advisors provide young people with impartial education and careers information, advice and guidance, helping them to access employment and live independently. Additionally, Centrepoint's Apprenticeship Academy supports homeless young people into suitable roles in Centrepoint. These young people gain qualifications, get real on-the-job experience and earn a living wage. So far, this financial year, more than 60 per cent of young people who moved on from Centrepoint are in employment, education, or training.

However, Centrepoint cannot end youth homelessness alone. This Employer Guidance outlines how employers and charities, such as Centrepoint, can work together to support homeless young people to access and make the most of work.

- **Seyi Obakin OBE**
Chief Executive, Centrepoint



Introduction

This guide outlines key changes that employers can make to improve recruitment and employment practices and support homeless young people to access work.

We recognise that recruitment and employment practices vary across different industries, depending on the needs of employers and sector norms. The changes outlined in this guide can act as important starting points upon which employers can tailor their recruitment and employment practices to suit the needs of young people who have experienced homelessness. We recommend that employers:

- **Work in partnership** – build connections with charities and other relevant organisations to be able to provide comprehensive support to homeless young people in the workforce.
- **Improve access to work for homeless young people** – expand available opportunities by offering entry-level roles, work experience placements, and improve recruitment and employment practices to be more inclusive.
- **Support young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness** – provide a variety of internal and external support for homeless young people.
- **Provide training & development opportunities** – support homeless young people to further their career development.
- **Encourage their staff to engage in fundraising to support the wider goal to end youth homelessness** – employers can help to reduce barriers to work by ensuring that no future young person experiences homelessness.



Methods

This guide builds on Centrepoin’s 2024 research “Untapped Resource: Homeless Young People’s Employment Experiences and Aspirations”,¹ and was created with support from a steering group formed of four young people with lived experiences of homelessness. Working with researchers, the steering group co-designed the interview guide exploring how employers implement recruitment and employment practices that support young people with experiences of homelessness. Interviews were then conducted with employers from sectors such as retail, finance, construction and hospitality to examine how they have supported homeless young people to access and sustain employment.

¹ “Untapped Resource: Homeless Young People’s Employment Experiences and Aspirations” involved in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus groups with: 21 young people with lived experiences of homelessness; 14 homelessness sector staff members; six staff representing four different employers; and 14 Jobcentre Plus and Department for Work and Pensions staff members. Additionally, it involved a national survey of 246 young people with experiences of homelessness and a national poll of a representative sample of 1,000 young people (aged 16 – 25) from the general population. Statistics used throughout this guide are findings from the national poll of 1,000 young people.

Working in partnership

The employers interviewed emphasised the value of partnership working with support organisations that regularly work with young people with experiences of homelessness. Youth homelessness charities and accommodation providers will often understand the needs of young people. These organisations are, therefore, well placed to work in partnership with employers to ensure that young people are ready to take on roles and that they can get off to a good start.

“As an employer, we’re committed to being open to ideas about how we can successfully employ homeless young people. We’ll only get there by working with our partners who are supporting young people and learning through that experience, and not by simply thinking that we have all of the answers ourselves.”

- Employer

Example – a young person gives permission to their support worker to speak to the employer on their behalf to explain what their needs are and identify reasonable adjustments.

“We always think it’s best when there’s a collaborative approach going on and everybody’s kind of got their role to help somebody... if there’s anything that’s going on with the candidate, or any questions that I might have, then I’m always keeping an open communication with them [support worker] so that they can always weigh in their opinion, because obviously they know the candidate best.”

- Employer

Organisations will face different barriers when recruiting and working with homeless young people. For example, some organisations may have distinct security and safety requirements that all employees must follow. These requirements may be challenging for young people with experiences of homelessness who do not always have access to identification documents or may not be able to pay for qualifications. However, employers can mitigate for such barriers by working in partnership with support organisations who can identify issues and develop approaches to overcome them. Through sharing knowledge and experiences of working with and supporting young people, it is possible to implement solutions that address the majority of challenges before, or very soon after, they happen.

Example - a support organisation may recommend that employers provide training to young people who have experienced homelessness and may not have some entry level qualifications and/or requirements for the role. This may be through supporting young people to gain their level 1 and 2 Maths and English qualifications while working.

Recommendations

- **Employers should work in partnership with support organisations to understand the needs of young employees with homelessness experiences and how they can be supported in the workplace.**
 - ▶ This should begin pre-employment and continue once the young person is in employment for as long as is necessary for that individual.
 - ▶ Employers should be open to speaking to advocates, such as social workers or key workers, and young people themselves to discuss any additional needs or adjustments they might need.
-

Case study: Only A Pavement Away

Only A Pavement Away is a charity organisation that works as an intermediary between hospitality employers and charities working with people facing homelessness, prison leavers, veterans and others who are struggling to get into work. Their aim is to help support vulnerable people to find jobs within the hospitality, pub and restaurant industry.

Only A Pavement Away help to facilitate collaboration between employers and charity organisations, working with them to find young people the right roles and provide support from pre-employment through the duration of their employment.



Improve access to work for homeless young people

Provide opportunities for those with limited work experience

Young people with experiences of homelessness regularly struggle to gain work experience due to practical difficulties involved in navigating their housing situations, such as frequently moving home and/or living in temporary accommodation. As such, these young people can face significant challenges when trying to find permanent work.

Three quarters (75 per cent) of young people identified their lack of experience as a barrier to them achieving their employment aspirations.

Work experience opportunities and entry-level roles can be an effective way to bridge the gap between the requirements of a role and a young person's skills and experience. This is because they introduce the responsibilities required and enable the young person to gain the foundational skills needed for a job role.

Example - work experiences enable young people to understand that roles have different expectations. They give young people opportunities to understand the norms and requirements of working environments and discover whether they are ready for and would be suited to roles.

"It's giving an opportunity to somebody who hasn't had the skills and I think young people, they need someone to take a chance on them and... they're having that opportunity straight away to showcase themselves... so I think they're going (into a work experience) and they've not got that anxiety behind it."

- Employer

Recommendations:

- **Provide entry level jobs for homeless young people**
 - ▶ These should be for those with little to no experience - the steering group noted that they had been unsuccessful when applying for entry level jobs as they were competing with other applicants who held past work experience or degrees.
- **Provide work experience opportunities which:**
 - ▶ Offer a variety of roles for young people to experience during work experience placements so that they can gain a range of skills and make informed choices when applying for future job opportunities.
 - ▶ Have a guaranteed interview/role offer upon successful completion of the opportunity so that young people can immediately progress into full or part-time employment.

Case study: KERB+

KERB+ is the social enterprise arm of KERB, an organisation which specialises in supporting street food markets and food events. They work in conjunction with charity partners to provide coaching programmes to people from vulnerable backgrounds such as those who have experienced homelessness.

One programme provides a four-week paid placement, paid at the living wage level, to people who want to gain employment experience in the hospitality sector. People are referred through charity partners and, if they are eligible, they will visit the placement location so that the employer can assess their needs, what support they might need, and work with the person to discern whether it is the right kind of work environment for them. Each week of the placement they trial different roles within the hospitality sector such as customer service in cafes or bars, kitchen porter work, or logistics work. This can help young people to discover which aspects of hospitality they enjoy. The goal is to access a permanent job role by the end of the placement or at least to come away with concrete employment goals and a set of skills to apply for future opportunities.



Ensure interview practices are inclusive

Employers highlighted the value of practical and/or competency-based interviews to mitigate for the fact that homeless young people without prior work experiences are less likely to be able to demonstrate their skills in traditional interview settings. Additionally, employers stated that interview tasks should be relevant to the roles being advertised - enabling young people to prepare in advance - and that interviewers should take time to explain the relevance of tasks - so that young job applicants can understand that interviews are being conducted fairly.

Members of the steering group spoke about the anxiety that they had experienced in interviews and how this often exacerbated feelings of self-doubt. In particular, they noted that group interviews had led to them comparing themselves to other candidates - many of whom had not experienced homelessness. In doing this, they stated that group interview environments resulted in feelings of inadequacy, both in terms of their lack of practical work experiences and their physical appearance - as they had not been able to afford to buy smart clothing in advance.

Recommendations

Improve interview practices to be more inclusive for homeless young people:

- **Employers should conduct practical/competency-based interviews to accommodate those without work experience, while ensuring questions and tasks are relevant to the role and interviewers are open about what is being assessed.**
- **Employers should conduct interviews in individual rather than group settings to reduce anxiety and the likelihood that young people with experiences of homelessness will compare themselves to others.**
- **Employers should, where possible, be flexible when organising interviews - enabling young people to wear non-standard interview attire and choose online interviews to accommodate for those who cannot afford interview clothing or travel expenses.**
- **Employers should have diverse interview panels to help those from diverse backgrounds see themselves within organisations and feel comfortable presenting to the best of their ability during interviews.**

"I'm being interviewed as a young black woman by a panel of all white professionals who are all looking at me and scrutinising me... so I think if they had a more diverse recruiting panel, it would have also benefited me, because I would have felt a bit more accepted or understood."

- Young person

Embed understanding and flexibility into the organisation

Homeless young people often need to attend important appointments relating to their housing, finances and health. This can mean that they need to take time off during working hours. It is, therefore, crucial that employers enable young people to attend these appointments, without this harming their job-security and progress. Additionally, employers should proactively embed organisational policies defining reasonable adjustments and support for those who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness - so that staff with managerial responsibilities understand how to offer appropriate support.

"The guidelines should say that if you find yourself in this situation [homeless/financially struggling], this is what you could do as an individual and this is what a line manager should be allowing... which is flexibility to go to appointments, and to understand that there are going to be challenges in the short term."

- Employer

Example - an employer knows that one of their young employees is homeless and is living in temporary housing. This young person has suddenly been informed that they will soon be moved to another temporary home. The employer agrees that they can take the day off to move house, and reassures the young person that they can have another day off if they get moved again.

Nearly three quarters (73 per cent) of young people said the option to have flexible hours or part-time working was important to them in a job.

Recommendations

- **Implement a policy defining reasonable adjustments and support available for those at risk of or experiencing homelessness**
 - ▶ This policy should include allowing staff experiencing homelessness to temporarily reduce workloads, have flexibility with hours and/or days off and outline any financial support that can be offered, e.g. if the employee is struggling to afford their rent.
 - ▶ Policies should also provide specific grounds for young people living in supported and temporary accommodation who, upon taking on employment and losing their full housing benefit award, often find themselves worse off when earning over £130 a week or 11 hours for a 21+ year old. Employers should be flexible when offering hours of paid work to these young people, enabling them to avoid negative impacts on their benefit entitlements.

Support young people at risk of or experiencing homelessness

Offer formal and informal wellbeing support

Mental health support from an employer was reported as something that would be helpful by 60 per cent of young people.

It is essential for organisations to prioritise wellbeing and mental health for young people with homelessness experiences to succeed in employment. The steering group praised employers who had funded access to external mental health support and commended line managers who had taken the time to check-in about their mental health and wellbeing. Additionally, the group noted that quiet wellbeing rooms can act as a source of comfort, particularly for people who are neurodiverse and may struggle with loud working environments.

The steering group mentioned that they often feel uncomfortable asking for support from employers because they do not want to disclose that they have had experiences of homelessness. They highlighted that homeless young people often experience trust issues and may not feel safe to disclose aspects of their lived experience. Furthermore, they argued that there remains a stigma attached to homelessness, and that they fear that they will be seen as weak, less able and/or incompetent if their employers know that they had been homeless or were currently experiencing homelessness.

“That stress is just weighing on you, of like, “oh, do I tell them? Do I show the weakness?” Because you want to be perceived as competent and not bad at your job.”

– Young person

Recommendations

- **Employers should have support offers in place for staff who are struggling with their wellbeing.**
 - ▶ It is crucial that young people with experiences of homelessness can access wellbeing support to succeed in employment. This can include employee assistance programmes, external counselling, mental health treatments and having mental health first aiders in the workplace.
- **Line managers should have regular wellbeing check-ins with staff.**
 - ▶ These should be both unrelated to performance and provide spaces to disclose and share difficulties that the staff members may be experiencing.
- **If possible, workplaces should have designated wellbeing rooms for staff to take breaks when needed.**
 - ▶ These should be private, quiet and not used for work related tasks.
- **Managers should proactively offer support from the beginning of the recruitment process and continue it throughout the employment.**
 - ▶ This may come in the form of clear and transparent information about support schemes offered by the employer, such as financial or mental health support.

Case study: Pret A Manger

Pret A Manger, a sandwich and coffee chain with over 6,000 employees in the UK, runs the Pret Foundation which supports charities and projects working to help homeless people. The Pret Foundation has a scheme called the Rising Stars programme, which is dedicated to creating career opportunities for people experiencing homelessness or at risk of becoming homeless. This is a three-month paid work placement that involves on-the-job and online/in person training. Line managers have meetings with the Rising Stars regularly to check in on wellbeing. Additionally, they keep in touch with the support organisation who referred the Rising Star to ensure all their support needs are met. The Pret Foundation works closely with an external counselling organisation to provide mental health support for Rising Stars.

Staff from Pret reported that Rising Star placements are most successful when the staff member takes up the offer of counselling and their support organisations remain engaged throughout the three-month placement.



Offer peer support for new starters

Nearly two thirds (65 per cent) of young people reported that mentoring would be helpful to achieving their employment aspirations.

The steering group noted that employers should have buddy or mentor systems for new starters to help them acclimatise to their new working environments. These systems enable young people to have a source of peer-led, in-work support that is separate from their line manager – enabling young workers to share experiences, perspectives and issues with colleagues who will often have more work experience and authority, yet will not be viewed as organisational leaders.

“I think it's so important because it can make you feel more comfortable as a new person going into a job role as well. Having someone showing you things, having someone teaching you... and I think it's something that helps you to integrate into the company.”

– Young person

Recommendation

- **Employers should have peer support systems in place for staff members.**
 - ▶ These are particularly important for young people when they are new so that they have a peer who they can confide in and who can help them to become familiar with the workplace environment.

Provide financial support to those in need

Nearly three quarters (72 per cent) of young people reported that they would find it helpful to have practical support in employment such as flexible hours and equipment being provided.

Homeless young people often benefit from financial support from their employers. While not all employers have the capacity to offer substantial financial support to employees, it may be viable in some circumstances to offer loans with manageable repayment options to staff when necessary. Additionally, charity partners often have financial support which they can provide to young people to support them into employment – this can be discussed with support workers at pre-employment stages. Furthermore, employers should be able to signpost employees to other sources of external support such as that offered by the government and local authorities eg Budgeting Advance from Jobcentre Plus.

Recommendations

- **Ideally, employers should have financial support on offer to employees who are in need.**
 - ▶ Bursaries or loan schemes that support with uniforms and travel costs can be helpful when young people are first starting their role. This is because they may not have enough savings or money from their benefits to cover costs while they wait for their first month's wages.
 - ▶ Waiting for the first month's wages can often be challenging so it can be helpful to offer advance payments or have options to be paid weekly or fortnightly.
 - ▶ For staff members who become homeless or are at risk of homelessness, hardship funds can be beneficial.
- **Employers should support employees to access external sources of financial support.**
 - ▶ Employers should work with support organisations to help young people access financial support offered by charities, Local Authorities and the Department for Work & Pensions.



Have clear complaints and whistleblowing processes

The steering group stressed the importance of employers having accessible and clear complaints and whistleblowing processes. Young people are often less likely to report discrimination or bullying in the workplace because they are less familiar with what is acceptable in work settings and they may fear losing their jobs - especially when they do not have safety nets to fall back on.

“There's certain job roles I've been in where I felt like I can't mess up. I literally cannot put a foot wrong because I don't have any other options. It was already hard enough for me to secure this role.”

- Young person

Recommendations

- **It is crucial that whistleblowing processes are easily accessible, and employees are encouraged to report wrongdoing.**
 - ▶ Line managers should be responsible for making sure that their teams are aware of complaints and whistleblowing procedures. Additionally, these procedures should be clearly accessible and written in plain-English.
- **Managers should reassure their employees that complaints and whistleblowing will not have an impact on their employment unless they have violated the rules of the organisation. This should be in the procedures.**

Provide training & development opportunities

Over three quarters (77 per cent) of young people said that **access to training, networking or other personal development opportunities was important to them when considering accepting a job.**

“You train that person, they'll end up staying in this job role for four or five years or whatever it is and have loyalty to you.”

- Young person

Young people in the steering group spoke about the importance of having opportunities to train and develop within organisations. It can be mutually beneficial for employers to invest in skills development opportunities as they support young people to gain skills that can help them to progress and take on more responsibilities. However, it is also important that employers are transparent in outlining training and progression pathways so that young people are aware of what they need to do in order to progress within their organisations.

“I think we are very good at nurturing the talent that we've got and ... I think when you've got some talent that's strong... you want to keep hold of them.”

- Employer

Recommendations:

- **Employers should provide training and development opportunities to employees**
 - ▶ Training should be encouraged so that young people continue to develop and achieve career progression.
 - ▶ Apprenticeships can be a great opportunity for young people to gain qualifications to demonstrate the skills and knowledge that they have developed.
- **Progression within the organisation should be as transparent as possible.**
 - ▶ This includes having clear, accessible and formalised requirements for each role so that employees can see where they need to develop to advance within their organisations.



Case study: ASDA

Asda, one of Britain's leading retailers, which employs more than 150,000 staff members, has implemented its Asda Academy which has a range of resources to support staff to develop. For example, if a staff member wants to get into line management, there is a course that they can complete. This enables young people to understand how they can progress and take the necessary steps to further their career progression.

Additionally, Asda supports staff to develop through apprenticeship programmes that offer opportunities to work and learn in different roles within the business. This opportunity is ideal for homeless young people who may lack diverse work experience to determine their future career path, and an apprenticeship can broaden the employment opportunities available to them.



Be part of the movement to end youth homelessness

Voluntary fundraising is vital for Centrepoin and other homelessness charities to continue supporting homeless young people to access employment and live independently.

Employers can support homelessness organisations in a number of ways – by getting staff involved with charity events such as our Sleep Out; making a donation; or setting up a donation scheme linked to product sales. To discuss how your company can support Centrepoin, contact our team.

Recommendations:

- **Involve staff in charity events**
 - **Make one-off donations**
 - **Set up donation schemes linked to product sales**
 - **Enable staff to volunteer**
 - **Get in touch with Centrepoin to think about how your organisation can best support our goal to end youth homelessness**
-



Case Study: Coventry Building Society

Coventry Building Society has been supporting Centrepoin since 2023. The support includes making donations linked to customer savings accounts, staff have raising money by taking on various challenges, including a multi-day, 450km bike ride!

In addition, Coventry Building Society employees have helped prepare Centrepoin residents for the world of work by taking part in our careers days.



Centrepoint, Central House,
25 Camperdown Street, London E18DZ
Tel 0800 23 23 20
Fax 0845 466 3500

www.centrepoin.org.uk

Charity Number 292411
© Centrepoint 2024