

Homeless Link

Evidence and principles
for effective
Day Services



In partnership with



Acknowledgements

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- » Housing Justice
- » NEWway Project, Newham
- » Northampton Hope Centre, Northampton
- » Oasis Community Housing – drop-in Gateshead
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- » The Passage, Westminster
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- » Slough Homeless Our Concern
- » Springboard, Harrogate
- » Trinity, Winchester
- » UnityMK, Milton Keynes
- » Watford New Hope, Watford
- » Wintercomfort for the Homeless, Cambridge
- » Woolwich Service Users Project, Greenwich
- » York Road Project, Woking

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Introduction

What is a Day Service?

'Day Service' is a catch-all term including a range of different provisions that are variously called Day Centres, Resource Centres, Hubs and Drop-ins. Although there is no clear and consistent model, these services have features in common; they deliver crisis support to people sleeping rough and experiencing homelessness and they seek to provide welcoming, trusted spaces where people are supported to end their homelessness.

What does this document contain?

This document contains the core principles required for designing and delivering effective Day Services in England, alongside evidence of the critical role of Day Services and their significant impact on the lives of people experiencing homelessness.

What is the purpose of this resource?

Demonstrating the value of Day Services

In the first place, it is hoped that this resource will be used to demonstrate the critical role and value of Day Services, most of which exist 'hand-to-mouth' and undertake a wide range of crucial work with limited resources and capacity.

Day Services are often the first, and sometimes only, port of call for people experiencing homelessness, multiple disadvantage and acute crisis. They work regularly with people who may have been excluded from other services, either directly or through a lack of suitable provision. They are places of connection, belonging and progression, which aim to provide everything from meeting basic needs to resolving homelessness, health and legal issues to developing skills and

building confidence. As well as acting as a hub, Day Services facilitate access to other vital services.

Yet Day Services do not always have the status that they deserve within local homelessness provision. These principles and the accompanying evidence can be used to demonstrate the valuable role that Day Services play and their potential to have an even greater impact.

Development and service design

Most Day Services were established out of necessity to offer crisis support. Often under-valued by commissioners and local policy makers, services have developed at their own pace according to local need and available resources. The focus groups and co-creation sessions that fed into this publication demonstrated a consensus amongst services about 'what good looks like'. However, there is considerable variation in the size, capacity and development of Day Services across the country.

The principles set out the range of components needed for excellent delivery and can therefore also be used by Day Services to reflect on their existing work and identify areas for development and improvement. They can be used by new services to guide their approach to service design.

Visit [Homeless Link's website](#) for further guidance and resources.

How have the Day Service principles been established?

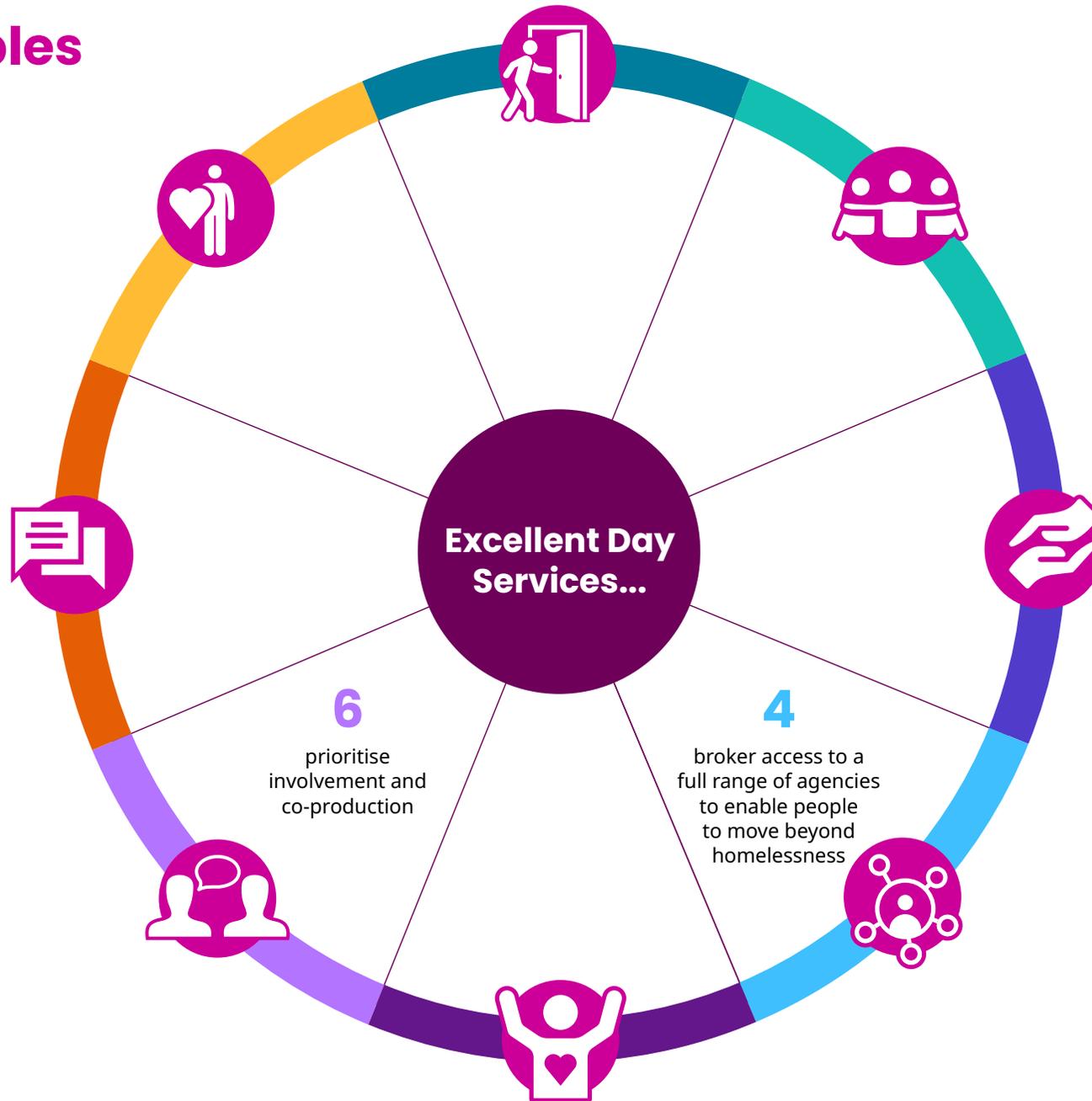
The principles are based on the views and experiences of people working in, leading and (previously) accessing Day Services across all regions of England. The process included a series of focus groups with Experts by Experience, Day Service leaders, frontline workers and commissioners as well as three co-creation workshops at which attendees explored the work of Day Services in depth and identified these core principles.

The work was undertaken in consultation with Expert Link who provided significant expertise and input as well as involving six Experts by Experience from among their members who attended across the different groups.

The work was also supported by artist, Bryony Attenburrow who provided visual notes and illustrations.



The principles





Principle 1:

Provide accessible, trusted and welcoming spaces

This means Day Services...

- » are based in locations that **facilitate access** for people experiencing homelessness.
- » **promote awareness** of their service throughout the community to ensure they are available to the full range of people who may need them.
- » are often (but not always) **open access spaces** that can be attended by a wide range of people at consistent times.
- » provide **welcoming, non-judgmental and inclusive** spaces where people feel safe to talk and engage.
- » provide a sense of **community and belonging** to those who attend.
- » have an awareness of groups that may be under-represented in the service, account for diversity of experience and **take steps to be inclusive** in the service offer.
- » aim to provide **high quality spaces** that are designed to be trauma-aware and are physically and psychologically safe.
- » are **available** to those who need to return to prevent re-occurring homelessness and isolation.

To operate effectively, Day Services need to be known to the public and ideally well-located. The ability of people experiencing homelessness to find Day Services easily gives them their unique ability to engage with people at key moments of crisis.

Day Services typically offer low-threshold environments that people can access as needed. An open-door approach combined with the consistency of a reliable daily (or frequent) presence, helps to create the conditions in which trust and engagement can develop.¹ Studies indicate that dependable points of contact enable people to feel more able to disclose concerns, accept support and, over time, begin to engage with wider services.²

Since homelessness is often the culmination of a long process of social disconnection, the chance to rebuild meaningful human connection is essential for recovery and stability.³ Day Services provide one of the few environments where this reconnection can begin safely and at a pace people can manage.

Although Day Services report supporting an increasingly diverse group of people, it is likely that several groups remain under-represented amongst regular attendees. For example, data from the Women's Rough Sleeping Census suggests that a significant proportion of women sleeping rough do not access homelessness services.⁴ In order to meet diverse needs, Day Services should seek to deliver inclusive services that are responsive to differences in culture, race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, disability and socioeconomic status.⁵

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Whilst many Day Services struggle with challenging buildings, spaces should ideally be of a high standard and designed with physical and psychological safety in mind. Many individuals experiencing homelessness live with heightened fear and distress, and the availability of calm, predictable spaces can help reduce threat responses and create a sense of psychological safety.⁶ This is an essential pre-cursor to enabling people to move beyond trauma and homelessness.



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Principle 2 :

Prioritise relationships and apply person-centred, trauma-informed and strengths-based approaches

This means Day Services...

- » prioritise building **trusting relationships** as the primary mechanism for engagement among people with experience of trauma, exclusion or multiple disadvantage.
- » aim to ensure that people feel **respected, valued, trusted and listened to**.
- » aim to provide a **consistent and warm environment**.
- » work to create **physical and psychological safety**.
- » apply **trauma-informed approaches** to reduce re-traumatisation and increase emotional safety.
- » work in a **person-centred** and **strengths-based** way to support individuals to identify their strengths and goals and ensure they are active participants in determining the support they need.
- » actively seek to create environments that **reduce bars and exclusions**.

Research across homelessness, mental health and social care shows that trusting, non-judgemental relationships are one of the strongest predictors of engagement, especially for people who have experienced trauma or exclusion.⁷

Day Services are well placed to build trusting relationships because of their open-door ethos, frequent contact with people and consistent, welcoming environment. Staff typically offer warmth, respect and strengths-based support, creating spaces where people feel emotionally safe and understood, something many identify as the main reason they return.⁸

Psychological safety is essential for change: without trust and emotional safety, individuals are far less likely to attend appointments, follow through on referrals or remain connected to services.⁹ When individuals trust staff, they are more able to regulate emotions, engage in problem-solving and take up services they may have previously avoided.¹⁰ Further evidence from trauma-informed practice shows that relational consistency increases willingness to seek help, sustain engagement and explore options.¹¹

Focusing on strengths and skills and on the ability to be resilient are essential components of trauma-informed care.¹² Research into resilience has identified three key factors: caring relationships involving compassion, respect, trust and listening, maintaining high expectations (including looking for strengths or assets) and providing opportunities for meaningful participation and contribution in the community.¹³ In this way, strengths-based approaches further reinforce agency, self-efficacy and greater self-esteem.



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Principle 3

Alleviate and prevent crisis through timely interventions

This means Day Services...

- » **rapidly assess** people's wants and needs either informally in conversation or formally using set procedures.
- » **meet essential and immediate needs** including provision of food, showers and clean clothes or connection to other agencies that provide these.
- » aim to **respond quickly and effectively** to crisis and emerging needs.
- » have **clear pathways** for linking people to emergency housing as well as providing connection to urgent health, mental health, substance use, financial and other support.

Day Services vary in their approach to assessing people's needs, ranging from informal conversations to the use of standardised forms and set procedures, but typically retain the ability to respond quickly and flexibly. Evidence indicates that early, responsive assessment supports more effective crisis response and reduces escalation. When people are unable to access timely, face-to-face assessment, barriers such as digital exclusion, communication difficulties and system complexity can delay support, allowing housing, health or safeguarding risks to intensify. These delays are associated with increased rough sleeping, greater reliance on emergency healthcare and higher rates of disengagement from services.¹⁶

The ability to link people quickly to emergency accommodation, urgent healthcare and specialist support is therefore central to the crisis stabilisation and preventative role of Day Services. Evidence from service evaluations and wider homelessness research consistently shows that where referrals are actively supported through advocacy or warm handovers, people are more likely to follow through and less likely to return to crisis.¹⁷

Day Services provide the essentials that people experiencing homelessness cannot reliably access elsewhere: food, hygiene facilities, warmth, clothing, and digital access. For many, these services function as the first point of contact during periods of acute crisis, offering immediate respite from the risks and pressures of rough sleeping and supporting the most basic physiological needs.

Evidence shows that meeting these needs is not only a matter of dignity but a fundamental component of stabilising people in crisis. Without access to safety, warmth and nourishment, people are far less able to regulate stress, manage emotions or engage with support.¹⁴ Regular access to meals also plays an important role in physical and emotional stability, as food insecurity is closely associated with increased stress, poorer health and reduced capacity to cope.¹⁵

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Principle 4

Broker access to a full range of agencies to enable people to move beyond homelessness

This means Day Services...

- » **facilitate access** to a full range of support, both by delivering provision directly in-house and connecting people with partner agencies.
- » **bring multiple agencies together** in one location for example by:
 - acting as a hub
 - providing one-stop shops
 - providing private spaces where other agencies can meet people on site.
- » deliver service provision in a way that is **accessible** to people experiencing homelessness and multiple disadvantage for example by:
 - hosting agencies within the Day Service as a trusted space
 - accompanying people to appointments to support the development of trusting relationships with other agencies
 - providing 'navigation' services to support relationships with other agencies.
- » take a **holistic** approach balancing the complexity of interrelated and concurrent needs.
- » develop **outstanding partnerships** with other agencies to facilitate access for people experiencing homelessness. This involves:
 - developing positive working relationships with other professionals
 - hosting professionals from other agencies, services and sectors
 - engaging in clear communication with other agencies
 - establishing formal agreements and information sharing protocols where necessary
 - developing clear referral routes into other agencies.
- » are embedded within a **network of organisations** that are working together to end rough sleeping and other forms of homelessness.
- » have a thorough understanding of the **wider system and factors** that impact and alleviate homelessness and multiple disadvantage.
- » **prevent re-occurring homelessness** by providing opportunities to re-connect with support and follow-up contact with past attendees where possible.



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By acting as both a hub and a connector within the local system, Day Services play a crucial role in improving access to essential support services. They typically bring multiple services together within one trusted environment, as well as offering pathways into housing advice, welfare and benefits support, immigration assistance, primary healthcare, mental health and substance use services and legal or financial guidance.

They also provide the navigation help needed to reach wider provision, so that people understand what support is available and how to access it. This includes signposting, advocacy and practical assistance with appointments, forms, digital systems and referrals – all of which increase uptake and maximise follow-through on referrals.¹⁸

Evidence consistently indicates that co-locating services within a familiar, low-threshold setting reduces many of the practical and psychological barriers that prevent people from seeking help elsewhere.¹⁹ Individuals with trauma or experiences of exclusion are often more willing to access healthcare, advice or casework in informal, non-clinical environments where they already feel safe.

Multiple service evaluations and studies²⁰ have demonstrated that co-location naturally facilitates interaction between providers, streamlines referrals and enables warm, in-person introductions that significantly reduce the need for individuals to navigate complex systems alone. This helps create smoother, faster pathways into support and reduces the risk of individuals disengaging or being lost between services. These studies also highlight a ‘trust transfer effect’: once trust is built with one service within a hub, people are more willing to engage with the wider system around it.

The same studies further show that multi-agency coordination enhances the quality and efficiency of local systems. Strong partnership working improves referral processes, follow-up and information sharing, reducing duplication and ensuring that stretched local resources are used more effectively. The NICE guidelines on homelessness also emphasise the value of integrated, multi-agency approaches for improving access, reducing barriers and supporting long-term engagement.²¹

Finally, evidence also shows that improving access to coordinated, preventative support for people experiencing homelessness delivers both better outcomes and measurable public-sector savings. People facing homelessness use emergency services at disproportionately high levels, making up to 60 times more A&E visits than the general population and experiencing more frequent and longer hospital admissions due to delayed presentation and higher clinical need.²² Research shows that models that strengthen access to primary care, provide continuity of support and use multidisciplinary case management, can significantly reduce avoidable emergency attendances, hospitalisations and wider public-sector costs associated with crisis responses. A recent paper exploring the cost-benefit of such an approach²³ indicates that every £1 invested can deliver two to three times its value in avoided harm and reduced pressure on crisis services.

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Principle 5

Are places of progression that build confidence, self-esteem and self-efficacy

This means Day Services...

- » have a **clear intention** to be places of progression where people can move on from homelessness and towards **independent and fulfilled lives**.
- » provide positive, active spaces that reduce social isolation and create a **sense of connection and belonging**.
- » **build self-esteem** and empower people with the knowledge and tools to self-advocate and live independently.
- » deliver a range of **activities** to build confidence and enable people to explore strengths and interests.
- » encourage people to engage in activities within the **local community** where appropriate.
- » encourage the development of **positive social relationships** and connections that support people as they move beyond crisis and homelessness.
- » support people to **move on from the service** if and when appropriate whilst providing an ongoing offer of support as needed.

Homelessness is often an isolating experience. Day Services are places of connection and belonging where people can feel part of a community. A strong body of evidence links social isolation with deteriorating mental health, reduced resilience and prolonged experiences of homelessness.²⁴ By offering regular points of contact and positive social interaction, Day Services help

counter this, providing structure, motivation and a supportive environment in which people can begin to rebuild confidence and identity.²⁵

Day Services typically deliver a range of formal and informal activities such as group sessions, creative arts, sports, skills-building workshops, volunteering roles and peer-led support. These activities often become important social anchors, offering both informal companionship and opportunities to regain confidence, capability and a sense of structure, particularly for individuals who may be disconnected from family, services or wider society.

There is emerging, albeit limited, evidence that developing life skills such as cooking, budgeting, digital literacy or understanding welfare rights, can contribute to improved housing stability.²⁶

Evaluations of physical activity and arts-based programmes also highlight improvements in wellbeing, resilience, agency and social connectedness for adults experiencing homelessness.²⁷ Research further emphasises the restorative value of learning and recreation,²⁸ which help people recover a sense of self-efficacy and personal agency which are essential building blocks for longer-term change.

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Principle 6

Prioritise involvement and co-production

This means Day Services...

- » ensure that people have a **voice** within the service and are treated as equal partners.
- » encourage people to feel a **sense of ownership** over the service and the organisation.
- » provide opportunities for formal and informal **volunteering** with routes into employment where possible.
- » engage with **peer mentoring** schemes where available.
- » take opportunities to involve people accessing the service and others with lived experience in the **planning and delivery** of the organisation.

Volunteering, peer-led roles and co-production consistently add an additional layer of impact. Evidence from health, social care and homelessness contexts indicates that involving people who use services in shaping, delivering or supporting provision benefits both individuals and organisations.²⁹

For individuals, taking on purposeful roles (whether through informal contribution, volunteering or peer mentoring) supports personal growth, confidence and self-efficacy. People report feeling valued, trusted and able to contribute, reinforcing self-worth, belonging and a sense of purpose.³⁰ Reviews of emerging evidence suggest that co-production is associated with improvements in wellbeing, social connectedness, inclusion, reduced stigma, and the development of personal competencies and skills.³¹

For services, involving people with lived experience strengthens relevance, responsiveness and quality. Co-production brings insight grounded in real experience, helping services better reflect the priorities, preferences and realities of the people they support.³² Co-produced environments are also associated with higher levels of trust and engagement, as people are more likely to feel a sense of ownership over spaces and support that they have helped to shape.³³



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Principle 7

Continually reflect, review and develop

This means Day Services...

- » collect relevant **data** and measure outcomes to understand how the service can develop, evolve and improve.
- » understand **emerging needs** within the local area to ensure that the service adapts and delivers appropriate provision.
- » regularly **review the approach** and service offer including through feedback from staff, volunteers and those accessing services.
- » prioritise **reflection, learning and development** to ensure they are spaces of best practice.

Evidence highlights the importance of reflective practice, data-informed decision-making and service-user feedback in improving service effectiveness and responsiveness,³⁴ particularly in complex and rapidly changing environments such as homelessness services.

Collecting and reviewing relevant data helps Day Services understand who they are reaching, how people use the service and where pressures or gaps may be developing. While crisis response and relationship-building are central to day-to-day delivery, data collection should not be de-prioritised, as it supports service improvement, accountability and the ability to demonstrate impact.

Day Services are particularly well placed to contribute to local intelligence about homelessness. Through regular contact with people experiencing a wide range of housing situations, they can identify trends and emerging needs that may not be visible through outreach or statutory data alone. This insight can inform service adaptation and contribute to improved local provision.

Reflective review is also essential to maintaining person-centred, trauma-informed and strengths-based practice. Evidence indicates that approaches such as trauma-informed care require ongoing reflection rather than one-off implementation.³⁵ Services that actively seek feedback from people using the service, alongside staff and volunteers, should be better able to identify unintended harms, respond to changing needs and continually improve how support is delivered.



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Principle 8

Focus on the safety, wellbeing and development of staff and volunteers

This means Day Services...

- » work to ensure the **physical and emotional safety** of staff and volunteers in the service.
- » recognise the impact of working in a high pressure environment and focus on maintaining the **wellbeing** of staff, volunteers and all who access the service.
- » have a **robust induction process** in place including core training, to ensure staff and volunteers feel confident to do their job well.
- » maintain a focus on **ongoing staff training and development**.
- » ensure that staff have access to regular **supervision, reflective practice and debrief** as well as emotional and mental health support as needed.
- » ensure there is a **diversity of knowledge and experience** amongst staff teams, including people with direct experience of homelessness.

Evidence from healthcare, social care and other frontline sectors consistently shows that staff wellbeing is not only a workforce issue but a critical determinant of service quality, safety and outcomes. Where staff are unsupported, over-stretched or burnt out, services are more likely to experience reduced empathy, poorer decision-making, higher turnover and diminished capacity to engage people effectively.³⁶

Day Services are often high-pressure environments in which staff and volunteers are regularly exposed to trauma and stress, as well as experiencing

incidents that may be distressing. In a recent survey of frontline homelessness workers, 57% said they were at risk of burnout and 51% felt their work had a negative impact on their wellbeing.³⁷

People with lived experience of trauma may also choose to work or volunteer within Day Services and as such the staff team may have experienced their own personal trauma. Research into healthcare and social work has shown that a significant proportion of those working in caring professions have previous experience of trauma or behavioural health issues.³⁸ Staff who are unable to deliver support in the way they feel is right may also experience moral injury.³⁹

Day Services therefore need to have an awareness of the impact of stress, trauma and vicarious trauma on staff and volunteers and ensure staff have access to adequate support such as regular supervision, team meetings and reflective practice, as well as the option to engage in Employee Assistance programmes or seek specialist support as needed.⁴⁰

Best practice across homelessness services highlights the importance of a strong organisational infrastructure to support staff wellbeing and development and protect from burnout, including clear safety procedures, ongoing training, reflective supervision and access to emotional support.⁴¹

Diverse staff teams strengthen service delivery. Teams that reflect differences in lived experience, culture, identity and professional background are better placed to recognise barriers, build trust and adapt support to individuals' circumstances.⁴² Roles held by people with lived experience of homelessness are shown to be especially valuable in building credibility and engagement, helping services remain grounded in the realities of people's lives and more attuned to what support is likely to work in practice.⁴³

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In the same way that Day Services aim to be places of progression for those attending, they also need to consider the personal development and progression of staff and volunteers. Staff who work in services that prioritise their personal development have lower levels of absence, higher rates of retention and increased wellbeing.⁴⁴



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What We Do

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for frontline homelessness services. We work to improve services through research, guidance and learning, and campaign for policy change that will ensure everyone has a place to call home and the support they need to keep it.



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