

Best Practice Guidelines for Groups, Charities and Individuals supporting the homeless community in Bedford.

This guidance was written by Street Support (Manchester), in consultation with persons currently rough sleeping or with lived experience of homelessness, and has subsequently been adapted by Bedford Homeless Partnership after consultation locally.

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Best Practice

1. Introduction

Homelessness brings on a certain amount of loneliness and vulnerability not experienced by any other community in today's society. Just a brief smile and exchange can boost someone's self-esteem and help maintain self-respect when living on the streets, but some people want to do more to support the homeless community and this document could help you to serve the individuals on the streets better and utilise your skills to their full potential while maintaining safety for everyone at all times.

The guidelines are by no way exhaustive and the advice has come from current service volunteers, charity employees, current rough sleepers and those with lived experience.

*Where you see ****...**** we have inserted a direct comment from a guest at a street group service.*

2. Commitment

Your group should be committed to safeguarding volunteers, guests and members of the public from harm while carrying out the group's services to support the homeless – treating everyone with respect and confidentiality while dealing with any vulnerable person is a must.

3. Aim

The aim of this document is to:

- Support new and existing groups (encompassing charity, organisation, groups and individuals)
- Utilise advice from individuals who have lived experience of homelessness on how best we, as organisations, can all support this complex and diverse community.
- To support the current work with the homeless community and any vulnerable person, you or your group may come into contact with.
- Ensure all volunteers are kept safe within the guidelines of safeguarding and are clear about their responsibilities on behalf of the group.
- Clarify the roles and responsibilities of everyone.
- Support the promotion of a safe working environment and a culture of care in which the rights of vulnerable people are protected and respected.
- Promote best practice in how volunteers and associated workers interact with vulnerable adults while providing community based services.
- Develop clear guidance and procedures for those volunteers working with vulnerable people and ensure through training and support that they are aware of these and able to implement them.

4. Best practice guidelines

Having spoken with many rough sleepers, people with lived experience and charities, the following information was compiled to assist with monitoring volunteers, helping you set up a group with the best possible advice and to, most importantly, keep the homeless community safe at all times.

- The recommendation was given by the majority of rough sleepers that although they see the merit in having young people helping the situation, they also reported they did not think it was a safe environment for under 18's to be after dark or within large groups of homeless people due to the high potential for substances, crime and violence. It is possible children would be exposed to people who have been convicted of child-grooming offences, who may use the busy melee of a street kitchen evening to build relationships with the children. Some of the guests may be subject to licence conditions not to be around children, so by having children at this type of event you may be forcing the guests to either breach their licence conditions or go hungry. It is also possible that fights could break out, or people may present with weapons which is not a safe environment for children. ****Education should be done but only in school settings where it is safe****.
- A lot of people with lived experience reported offers of 'a place to stay' by volunteers and individuals approaching homeless individuals or beggars. The consensus on this practice was that the individual being offered felt unsure of the intention of the person offering, made them feel at risk of abuse and that if the person offering did take someone home they may be inviting problems into their home.
- The potential for things to go wrong inviting someone home is extensive and unless you move, that person knows where you and your family live. The main feedback was that rough sleepers felt this practice is completely unacceptable. ****I've been sleeping rough for 4 months and when I get a flat I won't invite anyone off the streets in, I've been robbed and beaten up by other homeless****.
- Never give out personal information – mobile numbers, full name, home address or social media details. This includes adding individuals to your personal Facebook, twitter or other social media accounts. ****What is a nice time one day and everyone is getting along can become hostile really quickly**** – The best advice is to not leave yourself open to a possible negative situation, you could leave yourself and family in a very vulnerable situation. You can decide who you share information with, but you are not in control of who they then share that information with subsequently.

- It's always advisable to leave valuables at home when working on the streets - wedding rings only and no cash. This is more about not wanting temptation out there. The feedback we got was that not everyone is friendly... ****I was robbed of my shoes when I was asleep****
- The advice is to never lend or give money, even lending a cigarette one day can lead to handing out a pack every time you go out – when and how do you say no when you have always said yes before? Easy...Never say yes in the 1st place.
- When handing out donations/new items and/or packs of goods;
 - People are limited to carrying their possessions, some items will end up in the bin or dumped on the streets, especially if it is big, heavy or not really needed. There is plenty of evidence on the streets of Bedford.
 - Bags of food left out on the streets will attract vermin/rats/mice/pigeons and can endanger the health of the rough sleepers and the general public.
 - Cans of food, unless ring pull are not of much use and most rough sleepers do not have access to means of heating food.
 - Fruit is always welcome, softer the better, think bananas, as most entrenched or longer term rough sleepers are more likely to have dental issues. ****I keep getting given rock hard food, I just fancy a peach.****
- It's always advisable to stay in SMALL groups of at least 3 volunteers, it has been reported that volunteers have been followed to their bus home, offered stolen items and substances when working alone. It is **never** advisable to work alone on the streets completing outreach or working with guests/service users.
- Some of the individuals spoken to reported that they felt really overwhelmed when groups of people approached them with hot drinks, food and 'stuff'. They said they felt forced to take stuff.
- When we asked rough sleepers they advised that volunteers should never take anything home or offer to dispose of anything due to the risk of needles. If anyone asks you to take old clothing or hold onto anything for them politely say no. There are shower services available in Bedford through Prebend day centre. ****I got given a sleeping bag and it was full of lice****

- Promises.... The people we all work with may have been let down by society and possibly their family. They already feel on the fringes of society, have had to learn to survive and may have lost their basic life skills. Any promises you make as a volunteer that you cannot fulfil will just compound the lack of trust and could potentially leave someone at risk of staying on the streets longer. *****I've been promised housing by loads of groups, nobody has done it yet*****
- *****I remember a few years ago, we were like a community and we all looked after each other. Now though everyone is greedy, they all want to grab everything, all the people giving out new clothes and stuff. Real rough sleepers don't get the help anymore because all the others (people living in flats) come to town for free stuff*****
- Well-meaning gestures can be life threatening on the streets... The brand new labelled jeans you gave someone could make them a target for attack, robbery and assault. Brand new items donated can become currency, one rough sleeper said he used to sell anything with a label and he didn't think twice about robbing another rough sleeper for their coat if he could sell it.
- Whatever information people give you should be treated with full **confidentiality** in terms of not telling other service users. Telling another rough sleeper information could put someone at risk. However, any safeguarding issues or concerns should be reported through appropriate channels (see below).
- Rumours spread quickly and people are attacked over nothing, but if you have information that you feel is important you should **report to statutory services, Bedfordshire Police or the Rough Sleeper Partnership**. This can be done anonymously. *****I got beaten up because someone said I had a disease, I haven't got any disease, but they got told by (street group name removed) that I did, so I got beat up*****
- You should always report (**officially** NOT via social media) anything that causes you concern, especially if you are concerned about the vulnerability of a rough sleeper be it through intoxication, behaviour or they are under 21, pregnant or have a physical/mental illness.

- Make sure you tell someone in a position of either authority or a day service if you have a concern. If in doubt a quick email/call to Bedford Homeless or the Rough Sleeper Partnership or the Police. You can always report concerns to 101.
- During the research for these guidelines one of the main themes was about photos, especially on social media:
 - ***No photos, names or videos should be taken of rough sleepers without 100% authorisation of the people concerned.***
 - *Written consent is best and the individual must be of sound mind.*
 - *Remember the people pictured might have fled from abuse or have children and don't want their details and face plastered on the internet.*
 - *Please be respectful as most people reported that they felt like zoo animals when people took photos and it left them angry.*

There could be very large fines against either the individual volunteers or the organisations for breaching data protection.

- Should you be privy to sensitive information **YOU MUST** clarify with the sender of the information if you intend to share on social media, to other groups or in any way online without protection or encryption.
 - *****I seen myself on the computer once, it was at (daycentre named) and I got kids, what if they can see it too?****
 - *****I was filmed begging on Deansgate and they told me I wouldn't be on TV, then someone saw me on the YouTube thing*****
 - *****I saw myself on Facebook. I didn't ever tell anyone they can. They shouldn't do that*****
 - *****When the hospital sent my picture out to day centres because I'd left and was really sick, one of the groups posted it on social media. That was really rude I think, they don't have any right to do that. *****
- Be respectful of yourself, the people we work with and each other. There is nobody better than anyone else or more important than the person stood next to you whether that be another volunteer or someone you are working with.

5. Scope

The responsibility you undertake when volunteering on the street, towards:

- Vulnerable people, defined for the purposes of this document, as anyone who may be in need of care services and who may be unable to take care of themselves or protect themselves from significant harm or exploitation including physical and emotional abuse; ***someone who is currently homeless should be regarded as vulnerable.***
- The volunteers in your group who have contact with vulnerable people and who are required to act in a position of trust and to act responsibly and within the law, we advise to obtain a DBS check for each volunteer.

6. Clarifying Role Agreement between volunteer & group

It is the volunteer's responsibility to work within the scope of safeguarding and stay within the remits of the law in order to protect the vulnerable members of society from harm. It is however the group's responsibility to make sure all volunteers are aware of their responsibility, that all volunteers are checked and of sound mind to complete the duties within their role.

Volunteers are expected to attend a formal induction process and complete an application form. The people we are supporting are expected to trust that the volunteers really know what to do in an emergency.

Volunteers should be advised of how to signpost to other organisations who can help, such as Prebend Day Centre, King's Arms Project night shelter, the Rough Sleeper Partnership, mental health services, domestic abuse services and drug & alcohol services. This list is not exhaustive.

Volunteers should be very careful about conveying negative attitudes about other groups and services to guests, or other volunteers. They should also be careful not to offer an opinion if guests start to criticise services, as it is common for rough sleepers to "play off" services against each other.

List of recommended and further reading...

- <http://www.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/site-attachments/Managing%20Volunteers.pdf>
 - A detailed document centred on the management of volunteers.

- <http://www.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/site-attachments/Good%20practice%20for%20managing%20volunteers%20in%20the%20homelessness%20sector.pdf>
 - Document containing information on best practise working with homeless sector.

- <http://www.homeless.org.uk/connect/blogs/2016/jul/19/short-briefing-on-new-psychoactive-substances-nps>
 - Information on New Psychoactive Substances ‘Legal Highs’

Thank you for reading this document and taking on board that this is in good faith that you will listen to the advice from the guys out there, living it, they are the ones that need supporting into services the right way for the longer term to help end rough sleeping in Bedford.

These guidelines were written on 16th May 2018 and will be due for review on or before 16th May 2021