

Case study on addressing homelessness at large railway stations: Network Rail / Shelter outreach service



The Shelter team at Manchester Piccadilly station, October 2022



Shelter Team Leader and Network Rail Charity Champion at Birmingham New Street Station

1. Context

[Homelessness](#) is a national challenge that takes many forms and has multiple causes. Charity Crisis identifies rough sleeping as “the most visible and dangerous form of homelessness”. [In 2021, more than 2,200 people slept on the streets in England on any given night.](#)

Railway stations are open long hours, are relatively warm and provide amenities. They are busy with staff and commuters and equipped with closed-circuit television (CCTV). They can feel a safer place than the streets for somebody who is in the horrific situation of having nowhere else to go. The presence of those sleeping rough can cause passengers, station users and rail staff to worry.

Network Rail manages [some of the biggest and busiest railway stations](#) in Great Britain. Homelessness and rough sleeping are, therefore, issues directly relevant to the organisation.

2. Actions taken

Network Rail adopted a charitable theme of Routes out of Homelessness (ROOH) for Control Period 6 (2019 to 2024) and established partnerships with five relevant charities: [Big Issue Foundation](#), [Crisis](#), [End Youth Homelessness](#), [Railway Children](#) and [Shelter](#).

Amongst the activities put in place as part of ROOH were pilot Rough Sleeping on Rail (RSOR) outreach services, at Birmingham New Street and Manchester Piccadilly stations, in North west & central region.

The services were designed in partnership with Shelter and tailored to respond to the specific needs of station staff and those sleeping rough in and around the stations.

Network Rail station staff work alongside Shelter colleagues to approach and connect with people they encounter sleeping rough.

Each person that then chooses to use Shelter's service is allocated a key worker, who supports them in their journey to move away from sleeping rough. and to refer them to tailored help and support. That can include help with finding accommodation, registering with a GP, setting up a bank account etc.

The Shelter service works with local partners who are able to provide additional expertise tailored to the specific needs of the location. For example: the service is connected up with Greater Manchester Mental Health and, in Birmingham, with local substance misuse and rehabilitation services.

Many people have been living on the streets for a long time. An intervention by a colleague in a station is a first step in the process to securing permanent accommodation and life-changing support.

In addition to supporting service users, Shelter have delivered face to face training to station staff in how to support and engage with people who might be experiencing rough sleeping.

The services were operated on a pilot basis for 12 months, from October 2020 to November 2021. The positive impacts on stations were such that the services in Birmingham and Manchester were extended for 12 months (to November 2022) and then retendered to the end of control period 6 (end March 2024). In 2022, Southern region commissioned [services for London Charing Cross and London Victoria](#) stations and these are delivered by Shelter in partnership with The Passage and Connections at St Martins.

Network rail is sharing learning from the outreach services:

- Through "Addressing rough sleeping at stations" guidance, available on Network Rail's internal social value toolkit.
- Through the Rail Delivery Group (RDG) and British Transport Police (BTP) vulnerability strategic group.
- Through the Department for Transport rough sleeping on rail forum.
- With members of the Rail Safety and Standards Board social sustainability working group.
- At other meetings and events when we're invited to do so.
- By feeding into British Transport Police's new officer training
- By providing information about clients presenting as victims of modern slavery to Network Rail's modern slavery policy lead.

3. What's been achieved

In numbers, to October 2022:

- 485 individuals were referred to the outreach services
- 299 clients gained temporary or permanent accommodation
- 127 clients have received mental health support
- 141 clients have received substance misuse support
- 299 clients received support to opening a bank account and/or access benefits

In qualitative terms:

- The experience for passenger and station users is improved.
- Station staff are supported to focus time and effort on passengers.
- People working at the railway stations are becoming more empathetic to people who might be experiencing rough sleeping. They better understand what support they can offer them are more confident in approaching and engaging with them.
- The lives of hundreds of vulnerable people have been transformed for the better.

The service has won awards:

- Corporate Engagement Awards 2022 'Most Innovative Collaboration'
- Third Sector Business Charity Awards 2022 'Best Charity Partnership (Automotive & Transport)'
- UIC International Sustainable Railway Awards 2022 'Best Diversity and Inclusion Initiative'

Quote from a client

"Until I met Shelter my life felt pointless. The engagement workers seemed to really understand everything that I'd been through, and when they reached out it felt like someone had thrown me a lifeline. They told me about my options, one that I never knew were even available to me, and for the first time in years I have hope. I feel like I have a real chance to turn my life around.

I'm so happy to be housed with a housing provider who deals with addiction. I'm living in a house with 6 people who are all in recovery and want to achieve the same goal as me, which is to stay clean from drugs.

This time a year ago, life was very different and I remember feeling like there was no way out. But since that first 'hello' at the station, things have only got brighter. When the engagement workers reached out it felt like someone had thrown me a lifeline. I was given options that I never knew were even available to me, and they supported me every step of the way. Thanks to them I've not only got a safe home, but also a chance to see my daughter. For the first time in years I have hope for the future."

Quote from Network Rail

"I didn't know much about the issue [of homelessness] and I didn't think I had the right tools to face it, anyway. Shelter and the training sessions have opened my eyes and prepared me to offer real help."

- Customer Service Assistant

Quotes from Shelter

“The pilot has meant that we can reach out to people outside our usual environment and be there when people might need someone the most. If you’re used to being ignored on the street, or worse, you can start to lose hope, and we’ve been able to restore that. We’ve been able to offer advice and support, helping people who had been sleeping rough to find safe accommodation. We know that home is everything, and together with our partners we’re able to help people find and keep theirs.”

- Contract Manager

“The station teams’ commitment has been inspiring and we’re really proud we’ve been able to empower them to help hundreds of people in and around the stations.”

- Hub Manager

“We know from experience the difference it can make, to have someone reach out when you’ve nowhere else to turn. That first “hello” can change someone’s life forever. Anyone can become homeless and everyone has a different story, which is why we tailor our approach to each person, putting their needs at the heart of our support.

The pilots in Birmingham and Manchester showed us what’s possible when we all come together. We’re delighted to continue this work and to partner with others in the sector, to help people find a way off the streets, ensuring no-one faces homelessness alone.”

- Head of Community Services

4. Challenges

Budget. As rail finances become ever tighter it’s become increasingly necessary to have a robust business case to justify the service and to be able to evidence its success.

Pandemic and cost of living crisis. These have changed patterns of homelessness and services have needed to be agile to adapt.

Access to social housing. There’s a national housing emergency and a lack of good quality, stable social housing that meets people’s requirements. This can make it difficult to support individuals into a secure, permanent home.

Complex and lengthy Network Rail procurement processes. This creates risk that needs to be managed, for example: gaps in service; loss of key staff when redundancy notices have need to be issued because current contracts are coming to an end.

5. Critical success factors

Specialist expertise. Shelter and their delivery partners bring knowledge and experience that is additional to the skillsets of Network Rail colleagues. We simply couldn’t have designed and delivered this service without them.

The Shelter outreach teams include people with **lived experience of homelessness**. They are able to communicate effectively with even entrenched rough sleepers and gain their trust to work together to access housing and support services.

Consistency. Shelter’s team members have been a regular presence at stations. They’ve become known to people in the homelessness community and many vulnerable people who have not initially wanted to engage with them have done so over time. They have also formed strong relationships with Station Staff and British Transport Police Officers.

The Shelter team adopt a **‘person centred’ approach**. They take time to understand each person’s needs and can empathise with, and respond to, people’s trauma. Shelter colleagues have supported the most vulnerable who have come to our managed stations as a place of sanctuary: people who have been asked to leave the homes of friends or families; whose private tenancy has ended; whose relationships have broken down; and who have experienced domestic abuse. In extreme cases, the Shelter teams have encountered victims of modern slavery and connected them into specialist services.

Reporting data and case studies and tracking the client journey. This has informed business cases that have enabled the service to continue.

6. What’s next?

Outreach services in four Network Rail managed stations will continue to the end of March 2024.

We’d like to secure budget to extend the services to other managed stations, and into control period 7 (2024 to 2029). Network Rail might need to find third party funding for this.

We’ve consulted with rail industry colleagues, and Shelter is creating two video films and a toolkit, that will build station colleague empathy with people experiencing rough sleeping, and build confidence and skills to engage with them. These resources will be made widely and easily available to all colleagues in the rail industry (e.g. by sharing on an open access web page).



The Shelter Outreach Team and Network Rail colleagues in Manchester Piccadilly Station