

Reading Counts:

Why English and maths skills matter in tackling homelessness

Summary June 2014

Half of homeless people struggle to read and write, a new study has found.

Assessments of 139 St Mungo's Broadway homeless clients found that 51% lack basic English skills (i.e. would not achieve a grade G at GCSE). This compares to 15% of the overall adult population. The assessments also show that 55% of St Mungo's Broadway's clients lack basic maths skills.

This lack of English and maths skills is condemning people who are homeless to lives characterised by exclusion and disadvantage.

Devastating effects on the lives of people who are homeless

Being unable to read, write or do maths to a basic standard makes it extremely difficult to recover from homelessness and find a job. It also impacts on people's health and their ability to stay, or get back, in touch with friends and family. Lacking these skills can also lead people to become homeless.

Poor literacy led to Tracy losing her home because she failed to fill in a housing benefit form. *"I didn't know what it was so I put it in a drawer. I didn't know whether there was support or where to find support to help me."*

For a couple of nights Tracy slept on trains with her young child and her dog. She was also six months pregnant. After that they managed to stay with friends, but then Tracy and her partner fell out. *"I had to leave. He kept my daughter and I had to live on the street."*



St Mungo's
Broadway
Rebuilding lives, day by day

Let down by the adult skills system

The report also reveals challenges for Further Education (FE) colleges. College principals who were interviewed recognised the barriers to learning faced by homeless people but, as funding is reliant on attendance and qualifications, they are unable to take the financial risk and offer the kind of flexible courses which work for people who are homeless.

St Mungo's Broadway is calling on Government to:

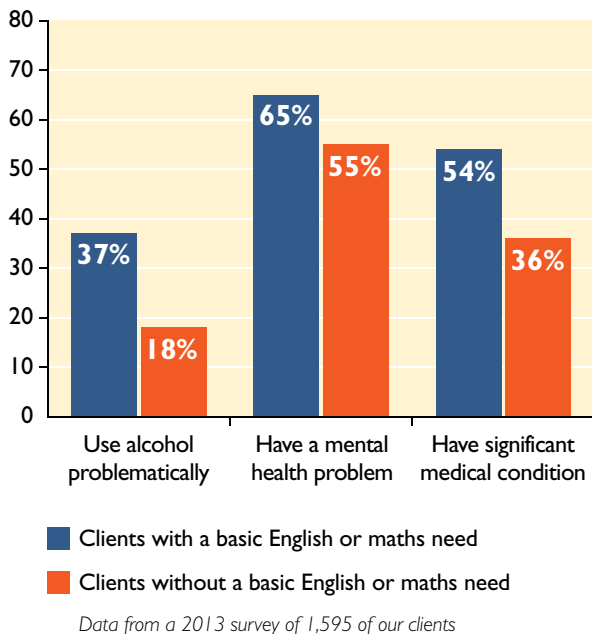
- Make a long term commitment to fund English and maths programmes which are designed for people who are homeless
- Commit to work with homelessness agencies to expand the STRIVE pre employment support pilot¹
- Scope the size of need and potential demand for basic English and maths skills provision for people who are homeless across England
- Ensure that any training people who are homeless are required to attend in order to receive benefits is compatible with their learning and wider support needs
- Encourage local authorities to better coordinate Community Learning and supported accommodation services.

¹ STRIVE is a pilot English, maths, IT and employability programme for people who are homeless delivered by St Mungo's Broadway and Crisis in London. It is funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

Let down since childhood

People who are homeless have often been abused or suffered from other types of extreme trauma as a child.² This, as well as a high prevalence of dyslexia, helps explain why people interviewed for the research had such poor experiences of school.

Health support needs of clients with and without basic literacy skills



"I didn't get any O Levels, but it wasn't because I didn't have the intelligence to do so, it was just my home life was so disruptive that I basically dropped out of school".

Experiencing disadvantage as a child can lead to a wide range of problems in adult life.³ As this graph shows, health problems are extremely common among children who have gone on to be homeless adults, particularly among those with poor English or maths skills.

A brighter future?

St Mungo's Broadway knows that people who are homeless can make incredible progress in improving their English and maths skills and getting their lives back on track. We help our clients to do this through our specialised work and learning services.

Barrington spent a period of time sleeping rough in London in 2012. After being referred to a St Mungo's Broadway hostel he decided that he needed to improve his literacy skills to find a job.

Barrington began working with a St Mungo's Broadway tutor, Simon, and his reading improved so much that he even found himself supporting others in his group. *"I'm really grateful to Simon for helping me to learn how to read. It has given me a new future... I'm looking forward to getting my own place. This and having a job is very important to me and it's thanks to St Mungo's Broadway, I'm nearly there."*

Specialised services are required to deliver English and maths training which works for people who are homeless. The Government has recognised this through funding the STRIVE pilot. However, this type of opportunity should be available to many more people who are homeless across the country who need to develop their English and maths skills in order to build a new life.

"Poor literacy and numeracy impacts across work, health, keeping a home and positive relationships. Our clients need a second, sometimes a third chance to build their future. That's why we, and our supporters, are asking the Government to deliver on their promise to prioritise training opportunities for homeless people."

Howard Sinclair,
St Mungo's Broadway Chief Executive

To download a full copy of *Reading Counts: Why English and maths skills matter in tackling homelessness* please visit www.mungosbroadway.org.uk

² Fitzpatrick, S., Bramley, G. and Johnsen, S. (2012) *Multiple Exclusion Homelessness in the UK: An Overview of Key Findings, Briefing Paper No. 1*
³ HM Government (2012) *Social Justice: Transforming Lives*

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