Meaningful occupation and activities can give homeless people something positive to do with the aim of building their self esteem, developing their skills and building social networks away from the streets. Activities are also important in preventing the boredom that may lead people to turn back to the streets, or to alcohol or drugs.

Although the ultimate aim for many people will be paid employment, for others pre-vocational lifeskills training and confidence-building activities can help encourage them to develop healthier lifestyles. Meaningful occupation and activities can be just as vital when homeless people have been rehoused in their own accommodation, when isolation and boredom can be most acute. There is rarely a clear dividing line between meaningful occupation and education, training and employment activities.

**CONTEXT**

Coming in from the Cold, the Social Exclusion Unit's 1999 Rough Sleeping strategy recognised the importance of Meaningful Occupation. The Government's new rough sleeping strategy, No One Left Out – Communities ending rough sleeping published in November 2008 pledges to "extend positive activities that motivate and empower people to take greater control in their lives."

Read more about the policy environment in our briefing: Engagement, education, training and employment [PDF].

These are key issues for Homeless Link's [regional development team](#) which is working to make services for homeless people [Places of Change](#). As part of this work the regional team supports organisations to provide activities and develop partnerships with other projects providing daytime activity.

**DEVELOPING YOUR APPROACH**

Good projects happen where there is a commitment from staff who believe that activity makes a difference to people's lives and where it is seen as a core aspect of the service's work. They also develop from listening to and involving clients. Involving the people who will take part in the activities in planning them has a double benefit. It helps ensure that the activities meet their needs and that they feel they have a stake in them. It also has the additional benefit of giving people a sense of achievement in having organised something.

Different people are inspired by different things. For many people, sport is what matters. Other people are inspired by creative activities, like arts, drama and music. It's important that you make sure you have something for everyone.

A sense of achievement is vital in maintaining interest and building self-esteem. Some form of certification / qualification helps people gain a sense of achievement. Many homeless people had a bad experience of school and don't have any form of qualifications.

Projects should be flexible enough to cope with chaotic lifestyles. Even where there is certification, a step by step approach is best, for example certifying people after every session attended so they are not disheartened or disadvantaged for missing a session. Many organisations run rolling programmes, so that service users can go back to a previously missed session at a later date and complete their training.

Different projects put the emphasis in different places, but the important thing is to engage with somebody in a positive activity that may in turn lead them to address their difficulties and move back towards independence. Building confidence and getting people into a routine are important in themselves.

**IDEAS AND EXAMPLES**

**YOU MIGHT BE INTERESTED IN?**

- Evaluating the extent of rough sleeping
- Ending rough sleeping locally
- Aiming High: Sport for All
- About homelessness
- Current campaigns and projects
- You put both hands in...
- Places of Change
- Ten key challenges to end rough sleeping
- Ending rough sleeping by 2012
- Ending homelessness

**RELATED INFORMATION**

- Partners announce ambitions for 2010
- Chelsea Flower Show garden
- Cardboard Citizens
- Streetwise Opera
- The Booth Centre
- Putting Down Roots
- Street League
- Homeless World Cup
- ThamesReach's Farm andConservation Project
- Older homelessness
Art, drama and musical activities allow people to express themselves and develop their talents. Cardboard Citizens is a homeless people's professional theatre company that runs free workshops for homeless and ex-homeless people. Streetwise Opera puts on high quality productions while offering activities that help homeless men and women rebuild their self-esteem and motivation.

The Booth Centre in Manchester has an outstanding record of engaging people in activities including conservation work, IT, art, warehouse skills, volunteering and part time work opportunities.

Putting Down Roots is a gardening project run by St Mungo's where homeless people gain experience and enjoyment maintaining public spaces across London and can go on to take a gardening course.

Streetwise Opera puts on high quality productions while offering activities that help homeless men and women rebuild their self-esteem and motivation.

The Homeless World Cup "exists to be a catalyst for lasting change through the development of street soccer worldwide in a way that creates a maximum social impact for the players involved – socially excluded, homeless people and people living in poverty."

DIFFERENT ACTIVITIES FOR DIFFERENT CLIENT GROUPS

Below are some ideas about what works best for specific groups. But these are only ideas; be flexible and don't stereotype people.

There are not necessarily very great differences between what men and women can benefit from. Projects have found that both like doing things such as art, jewellery making or gardening. Computer based courses and DJ classes are often popular with men, as are construction skills, art, music and sport. Drama is often a popular activity for women.

For people with limited mobility, gardening, for example something that can be done sitting down such as planting in window boxes, can be popular.

Often what works best with people a history of drug or alcohol abuse is something that takes people out of their environment and its distractions. Thames Reach's Farm and Conservation Project in London, gives residents - many of whom have alcohol problems - the opportunity to work on an organic farm in the Sussex countryside. They get up early, are focused and sober for a day (alcohol is not allowed on the farm), work as part of a team, achieve things and have fun.

Exercise and energetic activity are often popular with young people, as are drama and music. Also popular is learning new skills, such as ICT, web site design, cooking, and college link courses. Accreditation and certification can particularly important in helping young people, who may have had a poor experience of education, to feel that they have achieved something.

Older homeless people are less likely to want activities where they learn new skills, particularly employment-related skills, although these may still be relevant. Homeless Link has been working closely with four projects funded by Help the Aged doing Meaningful Activity with older homeless people. As a result we have produced a report Meaningful Activity and Older Homeless People which is aimed to give ideas and stimulate other agencies to do specific Meaningful Activity work with this client group.

In 2004, Help the Aged published a report, Journeys out of Loneliness: the views of older homeless people, which has a chapter on meaningful occupation. This found that for many older people it is important to be able to use the skills that they already have.

DO'S AND DONT'S

If your services is looking to engage clients in meaningful occupation and activities do:

- involve people - seek views from residents and get feedback afterwards so activities can evolve
- keep trying new ideas and keep up the activity as more people may come to try it and pass on the word
- think about how you promote activities - pictures can get the message across to people who can't read
- learn from others and see what works elsewhere.

Don't:

- write off groups with stereotypes, like saying drug users are not motivated and using this as a reason not to provide activities
- say you are too busy with other things - what's more important in breaking the cycle of homelessness than equipping people with skills and confidence?