

THE BIG PUSH

Big Issue vendors are forced far away from mainstream living by multiple challenges, but The Big Issue Foundation is here to help them fight for their rights

The Big Issue Foundation supports vendors from all walks of life. The vendors we work with are aged from 17 to over 70, male and female, and from every background imaginable. Many have suffered abuse, been victims of trauma, been failed by the education and the care systems, and have experience of the criminal justice system.

Some have multiple university degrees, a successful career to look back on, or extensive travelling experience; Big Issue vendors can suffer with mental health difficulties, physical health difficulties, and some are battling with addictions. Every Big Issue vendor's story is different, yet all face obstacles that push them further out of society. This article will shed some light on what those barriers are, and what is being done to break them down, because no one deserves to be excluded.

Between 2010 and 2015, bed spaces in homeless accommodation projects fell by 16%, with 41% of projects seeing a reduction in funding. People with complex needs face particular problems, with 76% of accommodation services reporting turning someone away because their needs were too great (Support for single homeless people in England, Homeless Link, 2015).

But even when vendors find a hostel place, a lack of accessible and affordable permanent accommodation to move in to means that vendors are trapped in emergency or short-term accommodation.

Many Big Issue vendors are "hidden homeless". Despite the fact that many live in very poor-quality private rented housing, they are not a priority, because they are not

seen as homeless. However, living in substandard conditions has negative implications for mental health, physical health and general wellbeing. Overcrowding is not uncommon, with vendors feeling like they do not have any rights and cannot demand better housing.

Unfortunately, some vendors are reluctant to access healthcare, while others find it difficult to access the care they need due to lack of an address. This not only leaves conditions untreated and therefore negatively impacts on vendors' quality of life, but also increases the risk of some health conditions, such as tuberculosis,

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which can spread extremely quickly in overcrowded conditions. When important preventative healthcare is missed, it often leads to vendors reaching crisis point.

Catch 22 situations are common. With some credit unions withdrawing their current account facility, and some vendors receiving letters informing them that in order to continue receiving their benefits they need to switch from a Post Office

account to a bank account, the inaccessibility of bank accounts is more excluding than ever. However, in order to set up a bank account, you have to have proof of address – an unrealistic option for many vendors. Some banks will not accept a hostel address, while a lack of utility bills due to living in severely overcrowded housing, sofa surfing, or living in alternative abodes such as caravans, poses a barrier for others.

Not having a bank account can also prevent vendors from moving into employment, as the majority of companies now transfer wages directly into their employees' bank accounts. This punishes vendors who have worked hard at developing their skills and experience by selling the magazine and accessing volunteering and skills-building opportunities by vastly limiting the type of work they can take on. Similarly, a lack of address can prevent a vendor from obtaining a driving licence, further limiting opportunities.

Big Issue vendors often have complex support needs, yet in the current climate these can be deemed insufficient for the vendor to be entitled to the required help, while seemingly neverending cuts to funding for vital services create yet another barrier. With less funding, some vital specialist services have been forced to narrow their criteria, reduce the spectrum of support they can offer, limit opening times, and operate on a drop-in rather than casefile/appointment basis. For vendors who are at crisis point, taking time out from vending to queue for an hour with no guarantee of being seen and no follow-up support on offer is too risky.

Our mission at The Big Issue Foundation is to connect every Big Issue vendor to the support and personal solutions that enable them to rebuild their lives



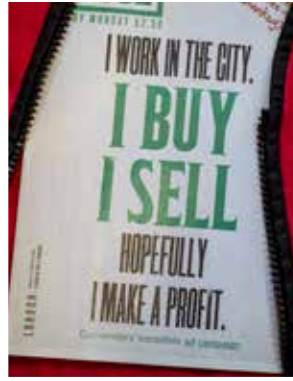
Service Brokers continuously build their knowledge of emergency and short-term accommodation services so they can refer vendors to hostels that are more likely to have a bed.

Service Brokers also support vendors to access safe and secure long-term accommodation by referring them to apply for any

housing benefit they are entitled to; bid on properties on the General Housing Register; and/or use the Vendor Saving Scheme to save a deposit for a suitable room in safe, shared accommodation or a small rental flat.



Service Brokers have a good knowledge of local health services so that they can support



vendors to access the healthcare they need. Service Brokers also organise for one-off and regular drop-in clinics to operate from their offices, offering treatment including podiatry, blood-borne virus screening, and mental health support. Additionally, our national Health Week ensures that vendors have access to a range of healthcare at a location in which they feel comfortable.



Service Brokers support vendors to access identification, which can open doors. For example, some hostels will only accept guests with official ID, so we use the Vendor Support Fund to help vendors obtain a copy of their birth certificate.



By working in partnerships with key services, Service Brokers are sometimes

able to help vendors navigate the complicated web of specialist support agencies. Service Brokers also organise in-house drop-ins, with volunteer translators for vendors who find it easier to communicate complex problems in their native language.

Crucially, our Service Brokers can support vendors to appeal against unfair decisions that deny them access to essential support.

