USING ACTIVITIES TO ENGAGE CLIENTS
USING ACTIVITIES TO ENGAGE WITH CLIENTS

INTRODUCTION
One of the most significant challenges agencies working with homeless people can face is around initial engagement – what sort of services can be provided that will encourage interest from people who may not have been involved in formal or structured education or training for some time. Many agencies have addressed this by offering low-threshold activities that combine an element of training or education with something recreational or therapeutic in nature.

MEANINGFUL ACTIVITIES OR ACTIVITIES FOR ENGAGEMENT?
There is a considerable overlap between meaningful activities or occupation and activities for engagement; the most effective activities for engagement will often have a structured education or training element built in to the design. Although meaningful activities can themselves be a valuable first step towards further engagement, there may be advantages in obtaining funding for activities that are not seen as being solely recreational in nature.

CASE STUDY: CREWE YMCA
Sport, other outdoor activities and art have proven to be popular means of engaging people. Crewe YMCA had a history of providing Learning and Skills Council-funded formal education and training. However, supporting people mostly assessed at entry-level and with histories of low educational attainment and lack of parental and emotional support, they discovered that informal education and engagement had a greater impact than more formal approaches.

Crewe YMCA provides football as an activity for engagement via their Football & Life Academy approach. This involves informal but structured learning across 6 modules, including anger management, teamwork, dealing with disappointment, managing health and self-care, as well as making FA accredited football coaching qualifications available to those interested.

They have funded this by charitable donations, support from the local community and by accessing adult community learning funding; they have been able to fund a life skills tutor and football coach, including supporting the former to obtain a PTLLS qualification.

Sustainment within the programme has improved compared to previous, more formal approaches. The YMCA see the pitch-side learning element of the academy as not just being beneficial for health and well-being, but also bringing other benefits: there are now two teams playing in local leagues, bringing a greater sense of social engagement and belonging.

There are several routes of progression which are client-led and non-prescriptive; these include supporting people to access more formal training and education, focussing on employment and volunteering, and further engagement with provision they deliver in accordance with the Foyer Federation's “Open Talent” model.

This offers a flexible portfolio of services based on their tenants’ strengths, abilities and interests. They also establish an agreement with their tenants – by maintaining their flat, engaging with activities and core Life Academy modules, and participating in key-working, tenants can gain credits via a Talent Banking model: credits can be spent on items that can be used to help them progress in education, employment or training directions.

CHALLENGES
Sport as an activity for engagement is attractive, but whether it is the right choice for any organisation will depend on a number of factors: are the facilities available, does the staff team have the expertise to design and deliver a low-threshold, structured programme, and is it the right fit for the client group? Agencies may wish to consider other options – for example non-sporting outdoor activities, conservation, cooking, creative or IT focussed activities. Another
option is to look at ways in which people unable to participate in the core activity can still be encouraged to engage – e.g. by becoming involved in related areas that could include filming, IT and website design or administrative support.

**TOP TIPS**

- Seek a local partner – does another agency provide anything similar, and can resources be pooled? What about agencies from other sectors?

- Engage the local community – for example, FE colleges and employers. FE colleges might be able to provide financial support or to assist via community outreach.

- Approach local sports clubs, outward bound centres and the like – do they have access to fund community engagement programmes, or can they provide support in some other way – promotional, providing facilities and staff etc?

- Approach sports governing bodies – many will have a community programme that agencies might be able to benefit from.

- Speak to Homeless Link, which has sports and arts specialists who can help to design and deliver activities in addition to helping agencies tap in to local resources.

- Speak to agencies who are already successfully delivering activities for engagement.

- Agencies delivering activities for engagement have found that it's often easier to develop something that works and then seek funding for it rather than the other way round.

- Consider progression routes – for instance into formal / accredited education or training, volunteering or employment, but also offer ways for people to continue the activity once their initial engagement has finished – e.g. Crewe YMCA and Cricklewood Homeless Concern now both have successful football teams playing in local leagues.

**LINKS**

- [http://homeless.org.uk/sport-for-all](http://homeless.org.uk/sport-for-all) - Homeless Link’s Sport for All project.
- [http://homeless.org.uk/arts](http://homeless.org.uk/arts) - Homeless Link’s Art for All project.
- [http://www.creweymca.com/](http://www.creweymca.com/) - Crewe YMCA, including their LifeAcademy@189