

Initiative helps more than 300 homeless people

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An initiative to help the homeless at railway stations has helped more than 300 people.

Network Rail teamed up with Shelter, the housing and homelessness charity, at two of its biggest railway stations: Manchester Piccadilly and Birmingham New Street.

Their efforts focused on helping those sleeping rough to find the support they need, thanks to training from Shelter as part of a pilot scheme. Interventions can, Network Rail has said, be a crucial first step.

So far, 316 people have been able to get access to the assistance they need. The help includes support to access essential services, like registering with a GP, mental health services and setting up a bank account, as well as support to access accommodation.

Of these, 15 have secured settled housing, and another 135 have been helped into temporary accommodation. As it enters its second year, the initiative hopes to do further work and help find settled housing for even more people on their journey out of homelessness.

Ryan, 40, was helped after staff found him sleeping rough around Birmingham New Street Station during the pandemic. Through the pilot, he was supported by Shelter with a number of issues, including addiction, and is currently living in supported recovery accommodation.

Ryan said: “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.”

The pilot will also see the opening of a new dedicated welfare room for the outreach project at Birmingham New Street station.

The room, furnished with donated furniture from Shelter’s partner and online retailer Wayfair, will give those seeking help a private space to have a hot drink and speak to engagement workers and station staff, away from the bustle of the station concourse. It’s thought to be the first dedicated room of its kind at a British railway station. A similar welfare room at Manchester Piccadilly is due to open in the coming weeks.

Tim Shoveller, Network Rail’s North West and Central region managing director, said: “It’s fantastic to see the real impact this outreach scheme has made to lives like Ryan’s and dozens of others in both Manchester and Birmingham, and the opening of the new welfare rooms.

“Before this partnership between Network Rail and Shelter, station staff often felt powerless because they didn’t know how best to help those without a safe and secure place to sleep for the night. Ryan’s success shows how equipping railway workers with the knowledge and skills to help people find a route out of homelessness can really turn lives around.”

Vicky Hines, Birmingham Shelter hub manager, said: “These pilots have shown us all what is possible when we come together to support people who find themselves sleeping rough. Someone knowing they’ve got options and don’t have to face homelessness alone can change their life forever.

“The station team’s 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. In the second year of our partnership with Network Rail, we hope to offer even more people a route out of homelessness.”