

REALITY TV



Outreach worker **Liz Blackender** on how the offer of a pair of new trainers and a flash TV eventually persuaded Martin, a long-term heroin and alcohol user, to relinquish his life on the streets and get off drugs.

By day the City of London teems with bankers and brokers, but by night, its doorways and crevices become home to one of London's highest concentration of long-term rough sleepers. As the homeless come under increased pressure to vacate the streets in the run up to the 2012 London Olympics, homelessness charity Broadway came up with a brave and novel approach: instead of spending money on the homeless, just give it to them in the form of a personalised budget.

A list of the most entrenched City of London rough sleepers was drawn up to offer personal budgets to help them off the streets and stay in accommodation. Martin, a problematic heroin user and drinker, was one of these clients. The outreach team had worked hard to get him into accommodation for years,

without success. Due to his chaotic lifestyle he had not kept appointments or interviews and remained on the streets.

When the pilot started it was questionable whether or not this hard to reach group of rough sleepers would take up the offer. Unlike other individuals who needed time to think about it when they were first offered a personalised budget, Martin immediately accepted the offer and agreed to meet up again within a week to get an action plan together. At the same time he re-engaged with the outreach team and was willing to attend an interview for hostel accommodation. Before receiving his personalised budget, Martin was required to maintain his benefit claim, engage with substance use services, keep all his appointments and to improve his appearance by wearing new clothes and shoes.

Four weeks after accepting a personal budget Martin moved into a 10-bed hostel specialising in alcohol and drug misuse support. The coordinator took Martin out shopping and purchased some clothing, a pair of trainers and a TV for his room. Later in the day a hostel worker called us to report that Martin had returned to the hostel minus the trainers and TV. He was heard 'bragging' to other residents how easy it had been to get the items and then exchange them for £400 of drugs.

We met again with Martin and discussed the situation and told him he would need to stabilise his drug use before proceeding further with the action plan. He went through a period of several months where he was not engaging either with the coordinator, his hostel key-worker or substance use services. He was not paying his service charges in the hostel and was in serious arrears, which he expected to be paid off for him from the funds in his personal budget. He was

told he was not keeping to his part of the action plan, that this was not acceptable and that he needed to take responsibility for himself.

Now, nearly a year and a half down the line, Martin has been living in the hostel for 16 months, he has been regularly paying his service charges and reducing his arrears. For the last seven months he has been the hostel's resident representative and has been on a methadone script. He is now stable and has reduced his drinking considerably. His self-care has improved and he has replaced the TV originally bought for him. He is now re-engaging in his personal budget action plan and planning for the future.

Did a personal budget work for Martin? I believe it did. He had not engaged with the outreach team meaningfully for nearly four years and was still sleeping out and begging to maintain his drug use. Within four weeks of accepting a personal budget, Martin had moved into a hostel. Despite a hiccup at the beginning with the sale of the TV, and a period of instability, he is now back on track. His personal budget, initially used to buy a pair of trainers and a TV, was the carrot that motivated him to engage. He admitted much later that when he was originally offered the budget all he thought was of buying "loads more drugs". After, clear boundaries were set regarding keeping to the action plan and taking responsibility for agreed tasks.

■ **Liz Blackender** is an outreach worker at Broadway

An evaluation of Broadway's pilot scheme can be viewed here: <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/support-rough-sleepers-london> <http://www.broadwaylondon.org/Home>