

Understanding Homelessness

Background

In response to a marked increase in homelessness, in parallel with abusiveness and antisocial behaviour towards the homeless on the rise, two exciting resources to raise awareness of the experiences and issues faced by the homeless have been created: the game, 'Homeless Monopoly'; and the creative toolkit, Understanding Homelessness. Developed for a variety of users including teachers, youth groups, voluntary organisations and service providers both resources combine creativity and real life stories to help users approach the complex issues around homelessness.



The Resources

Developed in partnership between Coventry University's Disruptive Media Learning Lab, Coventry Cyrenians and University of Warwick:



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Understanding Homelessness, is a creative toolkit that looks at the wider context of homelessness and utilises a range of creative practices including drama, art, journalism and case studies to explore triggers leading to homelessness, support available and the different social and cultural responses to homelessness.

Homeless Monopoly is based on research of the experiences of people who have experienced homelessness in Coventry, translating the situations they face and places they interact with, into scenarios and resources that players need to navigate and collect with an end goal of finding a home.

THE BIG ISSUE

PROVIDING A PATH OUT OF HOMELESSNESS FOR NEARLY 30 YEARS

The Big Issue Foundation is one of the UK's leading social businesses. It helps homeless and vulnerable people by offering them legitimate employment and offering support and advice in areas such as health, accommodation, finance, and substance abuse.

The Big Issue street paper was launched in 1991, modelled on New York's Street News. By 1993 it was so successful that it went to weekly publications. By 2016 it had achieved over 200 million magazine sales and currently operates in nine countries around the world.

With the motto *A Hand Up, Not a Hand Out*, the paper is sold on the street by vendors who are homeless, vulnerably housed, or marginalised in some way. Vendors receive training, sign a code of conduct, wear a tabard, and carry badges which include their photo and vendor number.

They are given five free magazines, then they buy more from the organisation at a reduced price (currently £1.25) to sell on to the public (current sale price is £2.50) keeping the profit on sales. They can work the hours they want; there are no fixed hours although they are given a fixed position to sell from.

The publication is more of a magazine than a newspaper now and offers a subscription service. During the 2020 Covid-19 crisis, it was also sold via supermarkets with proceeds being distributed to vendors who were unable to trade.

CONTROVERSY

Some other street newspapers think *The Big Issue* is too commercial in its approach, feeling that its content should be written by homeless people and be more socially aware and politically based. They think less should be spent on production and design.

The Big Issue takes the approach that they need to publish something attractive that will sell, so they make the magazine look very professional. They do have some homeless people contributing to the content but they also invite celebrity guest contributors such as the footballer Joey Barton and illustrator Axel Scheffler (*The Gruffalo*).

The founders of *The Big Issue* have said, "*It is possible to be both profitable and ethically correct*".

FAME!

You might have read the book *A Street Cat Named Bob* which was written by a Big Issue vendor and made into a film. Read more about it on the next page.



Big Issue seller, Covent Garden

READ ALL ABOUT IT!

JOURNALISM EXERCISE

Age 12+ Individual/Pair 1 hr / Homeless

Aim: to think about what attracts someone to buy something; and if there is a balance between promoting a cause and being attractive. Can you do both?

Resources required: Pen and paper, or word-processing or desktop publishing software

It would be useful to have sample copies of *The Big Issue* to share with the group, or you can look online for covers.

- 1) Design a front cover for *The Big Issue*.
- You can pick any time of the year, so consider what issues you might raise. Is it hot weather? Cold? A time of year for giving?
- What sort of content are you going to promote? Are there celebrity articles, political pieces, or commentary on current affairs?
- Are there puzzles? Competitions? Prizes?
- Compare everyone's covers - which would you buy and why?




Big Issue Malawi and Big Issue seller, High Street, Oxford, Wikimedia Commons.

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What's next?

Players enthusiastically engaged with experiences of homelessness during testing of the game in a secondary school in Coventry and with groups in Coventry City Council, in all cases participants felt that they had learned something and also had fun. The creative toolkit is hot off the press this week in time for the start of a new academic year with potential applications in Active Citizenship, PSHE (Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education) and within the curriculum.

Professor Nadine Holdsworth and Dr Jackie Calderwood have several ideas for future development that could include making versions of the game and toolkit for different locations and exploring the possibility of creating a Social Enterprise to increase insight into homelessness in society through artistic methods and creative resources.

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