

**JHCONSULTING**

# **The Big Foundation: Service Brokerage Model**

## **Evaluation Report August 2018**



# The Big Issue Foundation: Service Brokerage Model

## Headline Review

### Introduction

In June 2018, The Big Issue Foundation (TBIF) commissioned an independent headline review of its Service Brokerage Model. The key aim of the review was to identify the impacts that service brokerage has for Big Issue vendors and to explore how the model can be further developed, particularly in the light of TBIF's move from a homelessness to an anti-poverty agenda.

This report of the review summarises:

- Key areas of impact, strength and innovation
- Challenges for the Service Brokerage Model
- The Service Brokerage Model in the wider internal and external contexts
- Illustrations of vendor experience and impact from the service
- Action based recommendations to inform ongoing service delivery and development

The review is not intended to be an exhaustive evaluation of the Big Issue or the work of TBIF but is intended as a starting point for further exploration on key points that can inform the significant developments planned by TBIF.

### Methodology

The fieldwork for the review was carried out in June and July 2018 and included:

- Semi structured discussions with 19 Big Issue vendors in the Bournemouth, Birmingham and Bristol areas
- Semi structured discussions with key staff including the Service Brokerage Managers in each of these areas, the National Service Manager, Trusts & Grants Manager and other key staff
- Observation of 'everyday life' in the three offices to understand the day to day operation of the Big Issue and the Foundation in the regions
- Discussions with the Big Issue Foundation's CEO to explore the strategic context and direction for the Service Brokerage Model and as part of the organisation's wider development
- Review of internal reports that summarise delivery, performance and achievement

Discussions with vendors took place in person, either at Big Issue offices or on their pitches. Staff invited vendors to take part in the review, with all interviews being entirely voluntary and non-incentivised. Some informal discussions also took place in Big Issue offices at the invitation of JH Consulting staff. All respondents to the review were assured of the confidentiality of the discussions. In the report, quotes are presented in speech marks and italics but are not attributed in order to maintain confidentiality. We are grateful to the vendors for their time and generosity in sharing their views, without which the review would not have been possible.

## Key Findings

- The Big Issue provides a unique financial inclusion offer that can help people who are experiencing poverty and disadvantage with the means to earn a living to improve their lives, giving them ‘a hand up, not a hand out’. In 2017-18, there were over 2,000 active vendors, forming a very diverse group with vastly differing needs, and a range of motivations for selling the magazine.
- The cohort profile of vendors has changed considerably and now includes higher and increasing proportions of people from Roma backgrounds, people who are not homeless but who are living in poverty and people with complex needs. So that it can more accurately reflect and respond to these changes, The Big Issue Foundation (TBIF) is in the process of evolving from its traditional image as a ‘homeless charity’ to a broader focus of helping people out of poverty.
- TBIF offers service brokerage to all vendors with the intention of helping them to access services that they may need – health, housing, welfare benefits, training and others. Those taking up the service are very positive about the support and it is clear that it is a highly valued, valuable and tailored service. There is evidence of challenges in maintaining the balance between maximising sales of the Big Issue and meeting the support needs of increasingly vulnerable vendors.
- Whilst there is an assumption that all vendors could benefit from brokerage, currently about half engage with the service. The reasons for non-engagement are unclear, however, a number of factors are likely; these include lack of staff resources to cover the significant geographical areas for outreach work, some vendors feeling that they don’t want or need services and some who access support in other ways including family and key/case workers. This last factor indicates that TBIF complements rather than duplicates other services.
- There are an increased number of women vendors, with a proportion who have little or no English language. They are being supported but it is not clear if service brokerage is tailored enough to their needs and/or if there are sufficient appropriate services to which to refer them.
- Service brokers work from office locations in a number of different areas across England. This appears to be the most effective model for a number of reasons and would benefit from expansion in order to more effectively serve vendors, particularly those with higher levels of need. Outreach brokerage is offered in areas where there is no office base. It is more challenging to deliver and currently can involve lengthy journeys for staff which reduces the time available to support vendors.
- Staff are skilled and dedicated to providing an effective service, but there are indications that there is a lack of capacity to meet the needs and demands of vendors, particularly for the increasing number of those with complex and/or English language needs. Service brokerage interventions have greatest impact at the early stages of someone becoming a Big Issue vendor, however, staffing pressures can make early assessment and engagement difficult to achieve.
- Whilst monitoring processes are well organised and rigorous, there is currently not enough clarity about the nature and level of need across the cohort of vendors, and the reasons for non-engagement in service brokerage. This is required so that TBIF can ensure it can provide enough support for those who aren’t being helped effectively elsewhere, whilst avoiding duplication with other services.
- Significant efforts are made to develop and maintain the range of partnerships needed so that vendors can be referred to appropriate services. Staff feel there is still a lack of understanding across partner organisations about what the Big Issue does, despite their best efforts to promote and publicise the work, and that this can hamper relationship building. The shift in TBIF’s focus from a homelessness to anti-poverty agenda may help this but central teams will need to provide effective support to local/regional offices and staff if this message is to be communicated effectively.

## Recommendations

TBIF's service brokerage model clearly provides a vital and much valued service for many Big Issue vendors. In order to help take it forward in a sustainable way that meets the changing needs of the vendor cohort, recognises the strategic developments taking place in the organisation, and is able to position TBIF in the wider context of other services, the following is suggested.

- Review the vendor cohort and 'segment' it to identify broadly what proportions need intensive help, moderate help, light touch and/or no help. The review suggests that the main gap is around those that need more intensive help, but further investigation is required.
- Strengthen data collection to provide more detailed information about why vendors do not take up service brokerage and use this information to inform planning and funding applications at a macro level eg: Are these vendors supported elsewhere (by which organisations)? Have staff been unable to assess and engage them quickly enough? Are there cultural or language barriers? Do they have mental health needs that are preventing them from engaging? Do they just not want help?
- Identify the position of Big Issue selling (enterprise) and service brokerage (client support and signposting) in the context of each the regions in which it operates. This should include identifying gaps in service provision arising from not being able to refer vendors for help that they need. Decide whether or not TBIF should consider developing services to fill this gap or to deal with the gap in another way eg: lobbying local authority, working with partner organisations to help them develop the service.
- Explore, and if required, develop further the assessment and review process for vendors to ensure that it is robust enough to cater effectively for the increasing level and complexity of need.
- Consider the services available for women vendors, including those with poor English language, to ensure that these are meeting needs effectively.
- Use this information to develop further the service brokerage model so that there is the staffing capacity and skills to assess and engage vendors at the earliest point possible and to meet the differing needs identified. This should include employing staff that reflect the backgrounds of the vendor cohort, with 'lived experience', including former Big Issue vendors, and bi/multi lingual staff eg: Romanian.
- Consider how more office/base locations could be created from which to deliver service brokerage in parts of the country that currently rely on outreach, including through co-location arrangements with appropriate partners/organisations. Some modelling to compare costs in terms of creating new offices offset against reduced travel for outreach service brokers and better outcomes for vendors might be beneficial.
- Explore at senior level the underlying basis for TBIF's work, including the relationship between the need to maintain sales of Big Issue magazines (or any other sales based activity such as coffee carts) and support vulnerable vendors, and potential/actual tensions between the two.
- Continue with the planned introduction of the new monitoring and recording system for interventions, making sure that this is able to capture and evidence the depth, breadth and intensity of a brokers' support for vendors.
- Establish vendor feedback mechanisms and processes to encourage and include vendors in the development of TBIF's services. This will also help TBIF to meet a range of commissioning and funding requirements.

## Brief background

Since its inception in 1991, the Big Issue's ethos has been *"a hand up, not a hand out"*. The Big Issue Foundation (TBIF) was established to work alongside the magazine distribution network, with the mission *"To connect every Big Issue vendor to the support and personal solutions that enable them to rebuild their lives and determine their own pathways to a better future."* The vision for TBIF is *"To create opportunities that will end poverty and exclusion for Big Issue vendors."*

People interested in taking up this unique self-employment opportunity go through a process which culminates in them receiving a badge, a unique number and tabard that identifies them as a Big Issue vendor. A vendor is then responsible for booking their pitch by phoning or calling in at a TBIF office. TBIF offices are currently located in Bournemouth, Birmingham, Bristol, Bath, Nottingham, Oxford and London. Staff in each office provide service brokerage and manage a wide geographical area eg: the Bournemouth office covers Hampshire/Dorset/Wiltshire.

Pitches are normally allocated on a first come, first served basis, although sometimes new initiatives are brought in, for example, vendors with the highest sales being given priority and advanced bookings. Vendors can change pitches but many keep the same pitch and develop a regular and loyal customer base. The Big Issue offers vendors the opportunity to earn money relatively quickly, without the need for lengthy training courses. This is an attractive feature of the offer for many – *"It was very easy to become a vendor they checked my ID and did an assessment showed me a video on how to sell the magazine and within the day I was out on the street making some money, a lifesaver and I needed it."*

Being a Big Issue vendor takes a certain amount of courage and resilience. Not only do you need to persuade people to buy the magazine and *"some days sales are slow and it can take hours to make enough for what you need"*, but also vendors can experience abuse from the public, including racist comments. Racist abuse is particularly directed at Roma/Romanian vendors and whose numbers have increased over the last few years – *"People think - you're foreign and you shouldn't be here, and I'm not giving you any money."*

Some vendor pitches are 'sheltered' in as much as they are within railway premises etc., which can provide some measure of safety. In addition, wearing the tabard and badge *"is good because people know that you're an official vendor and the police will look out for you and help if there's any trouble"*.

A number of respondents in the review commented that *"you can earn more begging"*. This can be a challenge where there is competition between vendors and beggars in an area. It also shows the motivation that vendors have – that even though they could probably get more money without making the effort to sell magazines, they choose to *"try and do something that you can have some pride in."* That said, many respondents commented that they felt that the retail price of £2.50 is *"too expensive – lots of people don't want to or can't afford that. I think we'd sell more if they brought the price down."*

Vendors are also responsible for managing their own stock replenishment (magazines). They purchase magazines at wholesale price from a Big Issue office, an approved outlet (newsagent, shop etc.) or from van drops in pre-arranged places. It is entirely up to the vendor how many magazines they purchase from the wholesaler, how many they sell, the hours that they work and how they use the money they earn. In this way, the Big Issue is intended to put an element of control and responsibility into the lives of people who generally have little or none. For some vendors, the Big Issue is their only form of work, others have additional self-employment or casual employment.

It can be difficult for people not involved in the organisation to understand the difference between the Big Issue and TBIF. The public image of the Big Issue is the seller and it is unlikely that anyone would be aware of the work of TBIF unless they had a particular personal or professional interest. Whilst this isn't

necessarily a problem, it does mean that there are challenges in articulating key messages to the general public, partner organisations and to funders. There also remain some challenges in balancing the objectives/targets of these two parts of the overall Big Issue offer. These are discussed later in the report.

### ***A changing and challenging operating environment***

Sales of paper-based newspapers and magazines have suffered heavy and continual decline over recent years. Against this challenging backdrop, sales of the Big Issue have remained steady, and at a similar level to other 'niche' publications such as Private Eye. It's not clear how the Big Issue is able to maintain healthy sales when many publications that have similarly high quality journalism and engaging features are struggling. A significant factor may be that those who buy the magazine recognise that it has an altruistic purpose through helping someone who is at disadvantage – a rarity in publishing!

Efforts are made to keep up with trends that may affect sales. A good example of this is the introduction of portable card readers that vendors can use, recognising that many members of the public no longer carry cash and that this could adversely affect sales. However, vendors must pay for the card reader and will need a bank account linked to the reader. Indications are that these requirements present barriers to a number of vendors who have little spare money to invest and who may find it very difficult to open and/or maintain a bank account. TBIF staff will help to support vendors trying to open bank accounts and it is helpful that card readers are an option for those who want to take forward their enterprise.

The Big Issue was established in 1991 as an innovative response to street homelessness. Since that time, the UK has experienced major changes in the nature of homelessness, poverty and exclusion. There are now more benefit claimants in work than unemployed, child poverty has increased, housing costs have soared and street homelessness has risen significantly for each of the last 8 years.

The Big Issue continues to be linked strongly with homelessness and it is the case that many vendors are indeed homeless. However, TBIF is keen to shift its focus to the cause of homelessness – poverty – and to try and change the perception of the Big Issue vendor to a person who is trying to climb their way out of poverty, with TBIF providing a helping hand. This change is not only in line with current socio-economic trends but also will chime with developing national and local initiatives around in-work poverty. This should indicate to potential funders that the organisation has a good understanding of its strategic and operating environment. The changes outlined here are reflected in the current demography of the cohort of vendors, explored in the follow section of the report, highlighting the increasingly complex and varied nature of people's needs, united by the common factor of poverty.

### **The role of the service broker**

The service brokerage offer is intended to run alongside the enterprise focused activity of selling magazines, recognising that vendors may have a range of needs arising from their personal, health, housing and financial circumstances. The mission for TBIF's services reflects its ethos which is very much about supporting independence rather than creating dependence.

Service brokers are not caseworkers or keyworkers. They provide what could be described as an enhanced brokerage role. In the words of one service broker, *"We can't give the vendors formal advice on a lot of areas, like benefits, law and debt, but we can nudge them in the right direction and bring them into contact with the experts that can."* The role is more than that of signposting – service brokers provide support and encouragement to help vendors engage in the services that they need. They will also

advocate on their behalf on some occasions, for example, dealing with *“really unhelpful doctors’ surgeries who would rather our vendors didn’t register with a GP.”*

Currently, the work of service brokers is recorded by the number of ‘contacts’ that are categorised according to the focus of the information or support provided. A contact is a very variable measure. For example, in a conversation with a vendor, a service broker may talk with them about how to increase their sales, fixing up a doctor’s appointment and getting help with their Universal Credit claim. Each of these separate topics will count as one contact. Whilst this system does give an idea of the subject matter of the support asked for/provided (sales, housing etc.), the planned move to an improved recording system should help in reflecting more meaningfully the work of the service brokers, including the relationships that they build with vendors.

In 2017/18, 27% of contacts were regarding sales, with contacts for accommodation, money management, health and training opportunities/employment each accounting for around 15%. The highest proportion (27%) of outcomes are those associated with achieving personal sales goals. Other commonly cited outcomes relate to vendors accessing health services, improving financial management, and accessing training, work or volunteering opportunities. Service brokers also supported vendors to achieve outcomes focused on gaining recognised forms of identification (essential to get accommodation, work etc.), set up a bank/credit union/post office account and to get help with addiction treatment. Enabling vendors to achieve these kinds of goals helps to equip them with the prerequisites for active citizenship and inclusion in society.

These examples illustrate the very wide range of areas across which service brokers support vendors, highlighting the complexity of the role and the array of information on services and service providers that they have in order to deliver effectively. Whilst the scope of this headline review did not include speaking directly to service providers working in partnership with TBIF, it is clear that service brokers have very effective working relationships that enable them to link vendors with services.

## Emerging themes

A number of key themes have emerged from the discussions and analysis that took place for this review and are outlined in this section of the report.

### ***The changing nature and needs of the vendor cohort***

When the Big Issue was first launched, the typical vendor was white, male and sleeping rough. This has changed significantly with only 42% of the 2,026 vendors being White British (2017-18). 36% of vendors are Gypsy, Traveller or Roma, and 14% White Other. In addition, around one third of all vendors are female.

Ironically, the significant proportion of Roma vendors presents a potential risk to Big Issue recruitment/sales. TBIF doesn’t hold information on how many Romanians will be entitled to stay in the UK, if and when there is a Brexit deal. Even those who are eligible to remain may decide to leave. Many Romanians spend the summer back in their home country, partially explaining the dip in magazine sales during this time of year.



The increasing number of non UK vendors brings a number of challenges for the individuals and TBIF. Language is a barrier for a significant number, with an increase in the need for ESOL support and translation/interpretation services. TBIF is making efforts to meet these needs, including through recruiting workers from Romanian backgrounds, but lacks the resources to be able to provide a consistent and comprehensive service across all areas.

The majority of vendors are not street homeless, and this has been a steady trend over recent years. The housing circumstances of vendors are varied and provide an insight into the some of the differing motivations of vendors. Just under 25% are rough sleepers and around one third are in what might be described as unstable housing such as staying with family/friends, in hostel/supported accommodation or squatting. A further third are in rented housing, the majority in the private sector. The fact that so many vendors are in accommodation highlights the pressure that rising housing costs is putting on individuals and families, reflecting the steep rise in in-work poverty and deprivation.

In addition to the rise in rents and scarcity of social housing, an additional housing challenge for Big Issue vendors is the 'local connection' policy which many local authorities are strictly enforcing, meaning that people who cannot prove a local connection to a given area are deemed ineligible for help with housing and other essential services. Vendors and staff in Bristol and Bournemouth highlighted this as a particularly prevalent and difficult issue.

Universal Credit (UC) is currently being rolled out nationally and is causing hardship for many people on benefits (unemployed and working). The review found that whilst most Big Issue vendors had not yet been transferred onto UC, new claimants were experiencing problems with calculations and delays in payments. It is particularly difficult for people who do not have ready access to on-line services, and/or the skills to be able to use them, to ensure that they are able to apply for and receive the correct benefits.

Staff report that an increasing proportion of vendors have much more complex needs than used to be the case. Observations of and interviews with vendors for this review certainly indicate a significant number of vendors with mental health needs as well as physical health, addiction and housing. Even amongst those who are articulate and have had previously been in skilled employment, it is apparent that mental health and addiction issues are significant and present very challenging barriers for vendors and those trying to support them.

Of the vendors interviewed for the review, only three were female. This may be because a significant proportion of female vendors are from Roma/Romanian backgrounds and have little or no English language. In one office, of six Roma women who came into get magazines, only one was confident enough to speak English. The increase in the proportion of women selling the Big Issue indicates that TBIF should conduct further review of its services for women to ensure that they are meeting their particular needs. It is clear that offices have links with organisations that are able to help women, however, because they are in the minority it is important to make sure that they are receiving the help they need, particularly those who have no or little English. Ensuring access to ESOL, sexual health, maternity, domestic violence and other services is vital.

### ***The Big Issue and service brokerage support are highly valued***

The vast majority of vendors interviewed for the evaluation were very positive about the opportunity that being a Big Issue (BI) vendor gives them, and about the help that they receive through service brokerage, as the following examples illustrate:



- \* *“I am a Roma, I was born in Romania but was brought up in the UK, despite that I missed a lot of my education and left school with no qualifications. I have been a BI vendor for over 5 years. I have done some other jobs in between where I have been able, but I am content at the moment as a vendor. BI is a great thing it helps people, really helps them. I got into vending when I had not job and with no qualifications or experience I was struggling to get by. The high number of Roma vendors is because most Romas are in the same position as me, no qualifications, no experience in jobs, few friends outside of the Roma community and limited English. BI is good because you can just have an assessment and straight way start to work. It is perfect for us.....the staff at BI are extra friendly they are extra helpful – I don’t know the words for extra helpful, but I can say they are priceless to us.  
There is nothing negative about being a vendor, I have no problems I just work hard and make money - it is what I want. The staff, they work by the rules and we know what we can expect. They are fair to us. I have often brought other people to vend the books and they are happy with the work. They have all stayed. The jacket is a help for us. I don’t really have plans I sometimes dream things but who knows what will happen? I take each day as it comes. All I want is that my children, my family don’t have to suffer that they are in a good position and able to enjoy life. My children are in school and the teachers say they are clever and doing well, that makes me happy.”  
(Romanian male)*
- \* *“I have a lot of great customers and I have been doing this for more than a year. I used to have a job and I am hoping to get one again but for now this is good. I earn enough and I have support.”  
(White British male)*
- \* *“Being a vendor suits me really well. I’ve got a pitch that I’ve had for a long time and regular customers. I don’t do anything else and it works fine for me. I’m very independent and I don’t like to have anything to do with the authorities. At the moment I’m sorted with my housing and so I just come in and get my mags. The team are very helpful and although I don’t need much help I know I can ask for it if I need to. At the moment I just want a bit of help with a health issue, but I don’t want to use the mobile doctors so they (BI staff) are helping me with that.” (White British male)*
- \* *“I was a PA and a medical secretary but my health condition meant I lost my job and then my flat and life began spiraling out of control. I can’t get the same kind of work because of my health condition. I was introduced to the BI by a friend who is a vendor and I’ve been selling for about a year. It’s benefitting me because it’s increased my money, and it means that I’m seeing people and talking to them, so I’m not so isolated, and I get help from the office. I’ve got a good pitch which is near the office and they let me have that regularly at the moment because my health means I can’t carry heavy loads and so I buy the BI four at a time and I come back and forth to the office throughout the day.” (White British female)*
- \* *“I have been a rough sleeper for 19 years and I have been an addict throughout that time, I am now getting myself together am on methadone and waiting for a place in rehab. I don’t need support from the brokerage because I am with Addaction. They give me what I need. Selling the Big Issue gives me a challenge, it keeps me busy and keeps me away from my old lifestyle. It gives me a bit of money and social interaction all day. Also, some support from the other vendors. I have introduced other people in the past and I got someone badged up last week. I am hopeful that*

*after my rehab I will make changes that will stay with me. For now selling the BI is good, it works for me.” (White British male)*

- \* *“I am a Roma and my English is good because I have lived here for more than 10 years. When I first came I spoke no English but I have been to ESOL classes now I speak good. I have been selling for less than a year. My friend brought me to BI when I got pregnant. I didn’t know what to do and how I could look after the child. My friend said you will sell well because everyone can see you are pregnant and will want to help. I never had help from anyone else except my aunty. Not any other organisations, nothing from anywhere. I live with my aunty and she looks after my baby when I sell. At first I didn’t like it. It was very tough, abuse on the street and hard work – sometimes it takes a long time to sell one magazine. Sometimes I sell no magazines all day sometimes 10 on week days but the weekend I can sell more and make about £50. My plans are to stay for a while until I get a job – I can work in a restaurant or cleaning. I don’t mind as long as I can earn money and keep my baby.” (Romanian female)*
  
- \* *“I have been a vendor for nearly 8 years. I found it after about 4 months of being homeless and penniless eating only in a soup kitchen. I had no English at the beginning and this is the only job I could get, I learned English in Big Issue. I don’t do that now, I just work and I live with my girlfriend. I found it through SIFA (homelessness organisation). I was eating one day and I was introduced. I didn’t get help from anyone else but I did live in a ‘no recourse’ hostel for a time. Then with earning some money I was able to get a shared house with friends. Now I have loyal customers who always buy from me every week.  
My plans are to survive – Big Issue helps me to survive. There is nothing negative about being a vendor except too many beggars makes it difficult. People think I am begging and they don’t like it but I have a fixed pitch in the station. It is good. Big Issue paid for half of my passport, I am waiting for it now, and the best news I have a job – the railway see me working everyday – always happy and helping and now I got a job as a cleaner to start very soon, as soon as I get my passport. I will be on a probation for 3 months. My future plan is to get a permanent job pass the probation and work in a job only 5 days a week from 7am – 3 pm . At the moment I work every day – 7 days a week up to 11 hours a day, clients to buy the magazines are getting less, they find it expensive. So it is hard to sell these days.” (Romanian male)*
  
- \* *“I am Hungarian I have lived in the UK since 2011 and I have been selling for Big Issue for 2 years. It was a Hungarian support worker that brought me here to work. I was living in a hostel with nothing. I don’t have any addictions: no drugs no alcohol, I just work and am happy to work hard. I work 6 days a week with rest on Sunday. Having this job makes me feel normal. I can sell 40-80 magazines and I have a good pitch. I don’t want anything except to be able to work and sleep somewhere safe. I am in a hostel.  
I like my job. Big Issue brings me money, good people, social interactions, smiles and sometimes jokes. The staff look after me and are good to me. I get understanding and access to the doctor. I have problems with my health and now I get the care I need, I am a bit deaf and have other problems but it’s not so bad. My pitch is busy and under cover from the rain. I would recommend the job to others.” (Hungarian male)*

This selection of vendors' views highlights the wide variety of different motivations for being a vendor and the range of levels and nature of support that service brokers provide. The service is very flexible and adaptable, however, there are indications that capacity is stretched and that the needs of some vendors may not be identified and addressed because of the demands on staff. Some staff felt that it was difficult to get assessments done quickly enough, leading to this window of opportunity to engage vendors in the service brokerage being missed.

Implementing a more consistent and timely assessment and review process may demonstrate that vending and customised service brokerage reduces the vendors' need for support over time. This would be a positive outcome for vendors and provide useful evidence to persuade potential funders of the impact and effectiveness of an 'enterprise and support' package.

The recent data dive on service brokerage interventions carried out by Applied Predictive Technologies showed that support was more likely to result in an outcome the earlier in the vendor's time with Big Issue that the engagement took place. This highlights the importance of ensuring that there is staff capacity and time to carry out assessments as early as possible once a vendor is badged.

When planning any expansion of the service broker staff, consideration should be given to how the staff group can reflect the cohort that it serves. Recruiting people with 'lived experience', including former Big Issue vendors, and those possessing the languages of significant BAME groups eg: Romanian, would help to achieve this.

The Vendor Support Fund is an additional offer that provides a practical helping hand for some vendors when they most need it – *"I'd been sleeping on the streets for quite a while and then I got a place in a hostel which was great. I moved in and I had all these facilities but none of the things I needed to make use of them. There was a kitchen but I didn't have pots and pans, spatulas, nothing to cook with, and there was a shower, marvellous but I had no towel. The guys here (service brokers) helped me to get all those things which was so helpful – really great."*

As with service brokerage, take up of the fund isn't as frequent as expected. It does seem that some vendors don't know about it and this may again be a reflection on staff being under great time pressure and perhaps not remembering to mention it at appropriate points.

### ***Helping vendors to progress***

As discussed earlier, people have very different motivations for becoming a vendor. Some remain as vendors for many years because it fits with their chosen lifestyle or aspirations. Whether or not all vendors should be continually encouraged to progress into other opportunities is a moot point. It would appear that the best approach is to ensure that all those who want to progress are fully supported to do so, even those whose aspirations are currently quite low, whilst at the same time being clear that if someone wishes to be a Big Issue vendor as a 'life option' then that should be respected.

This clarity is important when considering further planning and development of service brokerage because it recognises not only that the individual needs of vendors vary, but also that some vendors will not want to engage with elements of the service that are focused on progression eg: training and employment opportunities.

For those who are keen to progress, it is clear that their 'journeys' are very variable. The review evidence suggests that vendors are being helped, and that the service is holistic, recognising that vendors have a

variety of challenges, all of which need to be addressed if they are to achieve outcomes that help them progress. This is illustrated in the examples from the previous section and in those that follow:

- \* *“What me and other Romas get from being a BI vendor is:  
Money for work and the harder I work the more I get  
Training – I have now got qualifications in English and Maths  
Links to employers – I have done a placement in Marks and Spencers to get retail and customer experience  
Improved confidence  
A chance to learn English – lots of Roma people value the English classes  
Meeting people more easily  
Getting out of the house for a break from the isolation  
Access to doctors and dentists and free treatment for teeth  
Help with housing and other things – I was living with my mum and dad and then I had my kids, then the council said we were overcrowded and I have to leave my parents’ house, the BI staff helped me to get housing and helped me to get benefits  
Help with translations – since Gabi was there (Romanian staff member) it has made things much easier for people, sometimes if she is not there I translate for people which is good but only sometimes.”*
  
- \* *“One time I overdosed and I went to the drop in centre and I went to Boots but they couldn’t help they said I had to go to hospital but an ambulance would be too long and I couldn’t go out without a cab. They told me I couldn’t leave without a vehicle to the hospital as it was too dangerous. Eventually they called BI for me and the staff organised a cab for me using the vendor support fund, I got to the hospital on time.  
Another time they gave me money towards the train fare to go to London for the night walk where I volunteered, the fare allowed me to go and I was really happy cos I met my hero James Bowen – of Bob Cat fame – it made my day. They also organised training in catering and I volunteer to cook at the homeless drop in centre. Next week I am getting training at Miss Macaroon – more cooking – my long term plan is to become a chef in a kitchen I would love that. BI has made a lot of difference for me: my finances have improved. I accessed training for catering and barista training and my employment prospects have really improved through training. I have made some friends and have support” (White British male)*
  
- \* *“Although the training on offer was a bit basic because I’d had loads of experience from my previous job, I really appreciated that they got my First Aid at Work certificate renewed and updated. Also, I did the customer service training and stewarding courses which led to a job at the football ground. I work there with my friend, on the payroll, at every home match. They also helped me to get a rail card – they paid half the annual fee – which makes working more viable for me. Without the reductions I get the train fares would mean that working isn’t worth it.” (White British female)*

For future planning, including funding applications, it will be important to have clarity about TBIF expectations regarding progression. The new ‘dismantling poverty, creating opportunity’ framework gives a very helpful set of outputs and outcomes for a range of areas including sales, housing, financial

capability, health & wellbeing, education & training and employment. These can be drawn on to identify what the expected outcomes might be, which will in turn help to shape planning and funding applications.

### ***A complementary and flexible service***

Currently, about half of vendors take up service brokerage support. TBIF tries to maximise take up - a very positive approach in terms of trying to ensure that all those that want help are able to access it. Whilst data to identify why some vendors don't engage with the service is not currently collected, anecdotally it appears that there are a range of reasons, as would be expected.

Some vendors have caseworkers allocated to them by other services or are being supported by specialist organisations, for example, *"I don't need support from the brokerage because I am with Addaction."* Although, as was the case with this vendor, whilst he was receiving support from Addaction, he was also being helped by a service broker with a variety of needs that fell outside the remit of this specialist addiction service. There are other vendors who simply don't want to access help, sometimes because of suspicion of 'the authorities' or a personal ethos of being self-sufficient or because they don't feel they need or 'deserve' to be helped.

TBIF currently works on the principle that all vendors could benefit from service brokerage. Given that services are stretched across large and varied geographical areas, it is highly likely that more than the current 50% of vendors taking up services may want and need support. This indicates that expanding the service would provide significant and needed help to additional people.

That said, it is likely that a proportion of vendors don't require service brokerage. Where this is because the vendors can genuinely get the support they need elsewhere – other agencies, friends, family – then their lack of engagement is positive and demonstrates that the service has the flexibility to accommodate individual differences within its offer.

This complementarity and flexibility are important strengths that can be used to demonstrate that service brokerage can fill gaps where they exist but does not duplicate other types of support. That said, if the service remains primarily an enhanced brokerage offer, the increasing lack of public and third sector services arising from austerity measures and funding cuts means that TBIF may need to review and develop its offer to provide more support, particularly for those with complex needs. TBIF, particularly where it has regular contact with vendors, is in a key position to be able to develop its offer and capacity to meet some of this unmet need.

There is clearly a good deal of knowledge of vendors amongst TBIF staff. However, in order to carry out the effective macro level planning and development of TBIF services, an exercise should take place to 'segment' the vendor cohort in greater detail, identifying different sub groups eg: high and complex need, aspiration to remain a BI vendor; high need, expectation of movement into work etc. In this way, TBIF can have greater clarity about the level and nature of service it needs to provide and the focus of that support. This in turn will help to inform future funding applications.

The introduction of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) has made collecting personal data more challenging. TBIF has always ensured that the full consent of vendors is gained when asking for any personal information, however, the requirements of GDPR has meant that this process is more involved and takes longer.

The scope of this review did not include a cost benefit analysis of the service brokerage model. The service offer sits between simple signposting and detailed casework, and it would appear to offer value



for money particularly because it supports better engagement of vulnerable people with existing services, avoiding duplication. Any financial analysis would benefit from finding some type of similar enhanced signposting/brokerage with which to benchmark the service. In addition, cost benefit analysis that identifies reduced dependency on welfare benefits, improved health leading to reductions in health service needs etc. would be helpful.

### ***Balancing the need for sales and for support***

For TBIF, the term 'sales' applies in two ways – the number of magazines that are sold wholesale to vendors and the number of magazines vendors sell to the general public. It is the wholesale sales figure that is key to the Big Issue, however, for TBIF, the ideal is that vendors are able to sell on all the magazines that they purchase wholesale. This is of course entirely up to the vendor but TBIF is concerned that vendors are able to maximise the income that they can generate so that they can tackle the many facets of poverty and homelessness.

The fact that the highest proportion of contacts and outcomes for vendors are for improving sales and achieving sales targets for the magazine highlights the unique nature of the Big Issue ethos of supported enterprise being the 'lever' to help people move out of poverty. Feedback from vendors indicates that the Big Issue approach clearly works for some – *"I sell every day, 7 days a week. If I have magazines I sell. I have a regular pitch with sales targets. I like the structure."* But others feel significant pressure to achieve sales targets and anxiety about failing – *"Now we have also been given sales targets. This is new and I don't like it - I never hit the targets and that is demotivating. I only hit my targets at Christmas."*

The increasingly complex nature of vendors' needs indicates that there should be greater differentiation of the cohort of vendors, to ensure that greater support is provided for some who are clearly struggling and that sales targets do not dominate.

In addition, it would be worth reviewing internally at high level (senior staff, trustees) the relationship and balance between the drive for sales (magazines and/or the coffee carts etc. under consideration) and the provision of support for highly vulnerable adults. Whilst the two are not incompatible, there are tensions that would benefit from being explored, and once agreement on a way forward agreed, effectively communicated to those in regional offices including front line staff.

### ***Office bases work well***

The Big Issue office environment helps in delivering effective service brokerage for a number of reasons:

- Vendors come to the office regularly to get stock which means that they have contact with staff. This can make it easier to ask for help when needed because they can use the need to replenish stock as the reason for coming into the office and can 'mention' that they need help at the same time. This is particularly important when bearing in mind that some people will choose to be vendors because they don't want to be seen as needing help and they value their independence.
- Service brokerage managers have a base from which they can access information and update vendors on any ongoing work that they are doing on their behalf eg: finding a GP for registration etc. They also have a confidential space when needed for discussions with vendors.
- Offices create a sense of community amongst vendors – important when you may be spending the vast majority of your time alone, with the associated mental and physical health dangers of loneliness and isolation – *"I don't have any family or friends here. I'm living in a tent hidden in the*

*wood because I'm scared about sleeping rough. Big Issue gives me enough money to get by and I get to see some people and talk to them."*

- Provides the opportunity to give additional support where needed – some staff provide services such as a basic breakfast which is *"particularly important on a Friday and Monday because some vendors who have particularly acute needs may not have contact with anyone or find it difficult to get food over the weekend"*.

Some areas don't have TBIF offices and there are significant costs associated with premises (rent, insurances, equipment, security etc.). In these areas, vendors replenish stock through pre-arranged drop off points or outlets (other organisations, newsagents etc.).

It is clear that service brokerage and support for vendors is most effectively and efficiently delivered through local TBIF offices. Existing offices cover large geographical areas meaning outreach service brokers may spend hours travelling to see vendors on their pitches or at pick up points. Whilst some of this type of delivery is inevitable given the spread of pitches/vendors, if service brokerage is to be developed to meet needs more effectively, having additional offices would help to achieve this. The benefits outlined above highlight the very positive role of a physical presence in delivering the service.

Premises are expensive, but it may be useful to consider co-location with partner organisations to keep costs low whilst being able to provide an office presence. This could also help to develop further the partnership relationships that are vital to linking vendors with services. In addition, some Big Issue offices that currently don't have service brokers working in them could be developed to include this facility.

If it hasn't already been done, it would be worth undertaking some modelling to see how, if more offices were established, this might offset some costs through reduction in travel time for outreach brokers and better outcomes for vendors.

### ***Partnership working is challenging***

Developing and maintaining partnerships is necessary yet challenging for most organisations. It takes time and persistence, as well as requiring particular skills and commitment from staff along with clear strategic direction and effective promotion. It is evident that TBIF local offices have developed very effective relationships with a wide range of organisations and agencies that provide services needed by vendors. These include for housing, health, addiction, finance/debt, domestic violence and benefits as well as some cultural organisations that support BAME groups. Each office faces different challenges arising from their location, the range of services available and the pressures on them.

Some staff felt that *"Historically, working with partners is difficult – they don't really understand what we do."*, highlighting the importance of 'central' TBIF services supporting local offices with materials, training and resources that help them to convey messages clearly. This will be particularly important as TBIF continues its move from homelessness to anti-poverty.

### ***Improved vendor feedback mechanism needed***

Currently, there is no consistent or regular means of getting vendor feedback about TBIF's services. Staff and vendors both felt that it would be a very helpful development to put in place mechanisms for this. Not only would this be best practice in terms of service user involvement in the review and development of services, but it is also a stipulation of many funders, including the Lottery.



The discussions held with vendors for this review were extremely helpful and many were very frank and open about their experiences. However, where staff were present for discussions, it may have been more difficult for some to be completely open. For this reason, ways should be found for vendors to feed back confidentially which could include periodic focus groups or discussions carried out by another organisation/independent person. In addition, care needs to be taken to enable access for those with language and literacy needs.

## Conclusion

Twenty five years on from being created, the concept of the Big Issue remains a relevant offer for people living in poverty and on the margins of our society, with service brokerage providing very useful and valued support for many of those people. This unique financial inclusion opportunity enables people to work for themselves under a recognised and highly positive brand, providing dignity and purpose, with help where it is needed.

The challenge is that our economic, demographic and societal backdrop has changed significantly since the Big Issue began. TBIF is engaged in a process of continuous development to clarify and evolve its role and purpose so that this unique offer can be communicated, understood and valued in this very different environment, and to ensure that it can meet the often complex and significant needs of the changing population of vendors. The recommendations set out in this review are intended to contribute to this strategic work, to help develop services and support for some of the most vulnerable people in our communities.

## JH Consulting – Brief Background and Biographies

**Jo Hudek** established JH Consulting in 1993 and has over 25 years experience of working with organisations of all sizes in the public, 3<sup>rd</sup> and private sectors. Prior to that Jo delivered and managed a range of skills and employment focused services for disadvantaged adults and young people. She works extensively with local, regional and national organisations that commission and deliver services for people at most disadvantage.

Jo has an excellent track record in delivering a range of research and evaluation projects. This includes devising and managing complex local, regional and national projects; primary and secondary research techniques, developing research and evaluation frameworks for clients' internal use, and delivering evaluation training. She is particularly skilled at formative evaluation that incorporates review and action based work to support service development during the evaluation period.

Jo and her associates have particular skills in quickly developing the relationships of trust necessary for discussions with very vulnerable and often wary service users, including those regarded as 'difficult to engage'. This aspect of her work is key to accessing the open and frank information and feedback required for meaningful evaluation and service development.

Jo has completed Accredited Practitioner training in Social Return on Investment (SROI) and has a BSc (Hons) in Psychology and PGCE (Higher & Further Education). She is an Associate of St George's House, Windsor Castle, and was a Specialist Advisor for the former Learning & Skills Improvement Service, as well as being one of the founders of a Community Interest Company that delivers to offenders in custody.

**Toni Meredith MBE** has been associate of JH Consulting since 2010, and is also a founder member of Account3, a highly regarded community based organisation that has supported disadvantaged families in London for over 20 years. As a single parent in her 20's she established a co-operative nursery which thrives to this day. She then went on to work for the Institute of Child Health and became highly skilled in ICT, setting up a national tracking system. This led to her establishing an IT company providing software solutions for clients including the Royal Opera House, and oil multi-national MW Kellogg.

Toni is highly skilled in undertaking evaluations and has extensive experience in one-to-one discussion techniques and facilitation of groups with a wide range of stakeholders, including those with additional communication requirements and where a sensitive and flexible approach is needed.

Toni has a significant track record in developing projects to help move out of poverty, for example, setting up the first women's driving Instructor course in the UK, supporting over 80 BME women to become professional driving instructors, followed by the first women's co-operative driving school. She also set up the first women's enterprise programme in Tower Hamlets, supporting 100 women per year to set up in businesses from Marine Insurance to Home Stay provision.

Toni's first degree is in Combined Science and she has recently been invited by Meiji University, Tokyo, Japan to lead on the UK element of an international comparative research programme into 'Social Enterprise as a Driver for Change' and is a Lecturer in Participatory Techniques at Rikkyo University, Tokyo. Toni was awarded the MBE in 2006 for services to London communities. Toni's first degree is in Combined Sciences and she also holds an Assessor/Internal Verifier Awards as well as NVQ Level 3/4 in Childcare and IAG.