

"Hard to Reach" Was Never the Problem – We Were

How the language of engagement has protected systems rather than people



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Introduction

In policy circles, the phrase “hard to reach” has become so embedded in the language of public services that we rarely stop to question what it actually means - or whose interests it serves.

It sounds, on the surface, like a practical description. Some people are simply more difficult to engage than others. They don’t attend meetings. They don’t respond to letters. They don’t show up. The implication is clear: the challenge lies with them.

But spend any time working alongside people who have been labelled hard to reach - as I have as a researcher and as someone building services for vulnerable people in Wales - and a different picture emerges. They are people who have learned, often through repeated painful experience, that the institutions asking for their engagement have not historically been safe, responsive, or worth the risk.

This is not a communications problem. It is not solved by a clearer leaflet or a more accessible website. It is a question of spending time and building trust - because trust, once broken by systems that were supposed to protect people, is not rebuilt through outreach campaigns. It takes a commitment to spending time.

This article draws on research I conducted with adults with learning difficulties across South Wales, exploring their relationship with the police and the profound barriers that stood between them and meaningful engagement. But its argument extends far beyond policing. It speaks to every public service or private sector organisation - including housing - that has ever looked at the people it is failing to reach and concluded that the problem must lie with them.

It doesn’t. It never did.

For as long as community engagement has been a policy priority, the term “hard to reach” has done an enormous amount of quiet work. It sounds descriptive. It even sounds sympathetic. But it places the difficulty of engagement inside the person being engaged - not inside the institution that is failing to engage them.

My doctoral research, completed at the University of South Wales in 2016, explored the engagement process between the police and adults with learning difficulties across South Wales. What I found was not a community that was hard to reach. It was a community that had very good reasons not to

engage — reasons rooted in fear, past bad experiences, a justified belief that they would not be believed, and a structural absence of any mechanism through which they could safely participate.

“The difficulty was systemic. The label “hard to reach” made it personal.”

This matters because language shapes resource allocation. If a group is classified as hard to reach, the response is typically a communications strategy — a leaflet, a translated website, a community liaison officer. If the same group is understood as having been structurally excluded, the response requires something far more fundamental: a redesign of the conditions under which engagement takes place.



What the Research Found

The adults with learning difficulties who participated in my research were not passive recipients of failure. They had developed sophisticated coping mechanisms for the hate crime they experienced regularly. They had views, opinions, and a strong desire to be heard. What they lacked was any real opportunity to be so — and where pockets of good practice did exist, they existed because individual officers had chosen to go further than their institution required.

That is not a sustainable model. Goodwill is not a policy.

The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 placed a statutory obligation on the police to engage all sections of the community. All. Not the easy sections, not the vocal sections, not the sections who attend PACT meetings on Thursday evenings. All. That obligation has never been matched by the structures needed to fulfil it — and in the decades since, we have hidden that gap behind the phrase "hard to reach."

What this Means for Trinity

At Trinity, we work with people who have been failed by systems in similar ways. People living in temporary accommodation, navigating homelessness, managing complexity that statutory services have categorised as unmanageable. They too are often described as hard to engage, hard to place, hard to work with.

And yet, when the conditions are right — when there is dignity in the process, consistency in the relationship, and genuine patience and time — people engage. Remarkably, readily, and with something to contribute.

The problem was never them. It was the assumption that showing up was their job.

If we are serious about genuinely inclusive services — whether in policing, housing, health, or social care — we need to retire this language. Not because it is unkind, but because it is inaccurate. And its inaccuracy allows systems to avoid accountability.

The people who are furthest from our services are not far away because they have chosen to be. They are far away because we have not designed our services to reach them. That is a structural problem, and it has a structural solution.

We just have to be willing to name it correctly.



Summary

"Hard to reach" is a phrase that protects systems, not people. Drawing on research with adults with learning difficulties in Wales, this piece argues that the barriers to engagement are structural - and that until we name them honestly, we will keep investing in the wrong solutions.

