



Developing Social Networks – Reducing Homelessness

Report Summary

A series of five very successful events involving over 200 people were held in June 2005 “to look at the national issues and contribute to local solutions which will enable people affected by homelessness develop positive social networks”. The Homelessness Task Force final report highlighted the importance of positive social networks in the prevention and successful resolution of homelessness and identified mentoring, befriending and mediation as key measures in (re)building social networks. Everyone relies on their friends and family. Relationship breakdown is a major cause of homelessness and isolation and loneliness can mean the difference between success and failure.

Homelessness strategies can drive change but they need to be integrated with other strategies and require better information on existing provision and gaps. Speakers and participants gave examples of successful, established mentoring and befriending projects and a range of proposed or pilot homeless mediation projects and explored how these and other measures supported the development of social networks and reduced homelessness.

Across the seminars a number of issues and themes emerged.

- Know and exploit what is already there
- More provision is needed
- Funding and priorities are all too often short term
- Volunteers have an important, valued contribution to make
- Mentoring and befriending to meet individual needs
- Mediation can be very effective
- Communities need to be brought “on side”
- Early intervention is vital
- Structural problems remain
- Measure “SMART”ly
- Involve service users
- Social networks keep you healthy

The seminars clarified the importance of positive social networks explored approaches, developed ideas, facilitated partnership and co-operation and generated an enthusiasm for action to develop mentoring, befriending and mediation opportunities.



Developing Social Networks – Reducing Homelessness A series of five seminars held in June 2005

REPORT

1. Introduction

This report aims to summarise the findings and issues raised in the series of five very successful seminars held in June 2005. Seminars were held in Inverness, Glasgow, Kilmarnock, Edinburgh and Dundee. Some 200 people were directly involved with interest expressed by many more. The purpose and theme of each seminar was the same – “to look at the national issues and contribute to local solutions which will enable people affected by homelessness develop positive social networks”. They were opportunities to share ideas, explore different approaches and consider how **mentoring**, **mediation** and **befriending** can provide the support needed to break the cycle of homelessness and social exclusion.

The success of the seminars has taken many forms. Most importantly, the events were enjoyed and found useful by the participants but in addition:

- The very process of arranging them with partners and participants and discussing their input made them look seriously at social networks and really consider what they were and should be doing;
- The advertising raised the profile of social networks as an issue and the Forum as an organisation;
- Previously uncommitted participants were persuaded that social networks were a pivotal issue and not just a nice add on;
- Participants heard of new approaches, discussed and developed ideas, made new contacts and really thought about what they could do within their own sphere to promote positive social networks.
- An enthusiasm for action to develop social networks was generated.

Feed back has been very positive.

Each seminar was different with different speakers and a different blend of participants resulting in each developing its own individual character. Reports of the individual seminars have been prepared for participants. Despite the differences, many of the issues and themes addressed were similar. This report aims to pull together the ideas and thoughts raised.

2. Background

The starting point was the recommendations of the Homelessness Task Force Final Report. Local Authorities are now asked to ensure that the appropriate support packages are available for those at risk of homelessness and for homeless people during their resettlement. They are specifically charged with including support for the development of positive social networks in their homelessness strategies. The Homelessness Task Force final report recommended that “all projects serving homeless people should pursue strategies to promote and support opportunities for positive social interaction”. The report identified Mentoring, Befriending and Mediation as key measures in building and rebuilding social networks.

The basic premise is that the lack of positive social networks, that is the personal networks of family, friends, colleagues and acquaintances we each individually have, is literally bad for you health. More specifically a lack of positive social networks:

- puts you at greater risk of homelessness;
- makes the transition out of homelessness even more difficult than it already is;
- often leads to failure to sustain a new tenancy; and
- leads to repeat episodes of homelessness – each more damaging than the last.

There is a substantial body of research supporting this premise and identifying the cost to the individual and to the public purse.

Many local authorities have started to incorporate measures to support the development of social networks within their existing provision. This is a major step forward and local authorities deserve praise for the action they have taken so far. However this is not an issue for local authorities alone. Developing long term solutions such as mentoring, befriending and mediation services will require the support of specialists in these areas as well as everyone working to support people affected by homelessness. It is easy to understand that with the pressure on just finding temporary accommodation for everyone, things like tending friendship networks can take a back seat. But the essence of the Task Force approach is that homelessness is about more than a roof and that radical solutions are needed if the damaging, costly cycle of homelessness and repeat homelessness is to be broken.

These seminars were an opportunity for local authority staff, voluntary organisations and others involved in homelessness, mentoring, befriending or mentoring to work together to make a positive difference to the support offered to people affected by homelessness and make mentoring, mediation and befriending services widely accessible.

3. The Importance of Social Networks

A major recurring theme through the seminars was the importance of social networks for everyone and how much we individually rely on them, in good times but even more so in bad for:

- Stability
- Belonging
- Community
- Acceptance
- Defining self

as well as direct support. Many participants related this to their own personal experience giving examples of where, without their social networks, their situation might have been very different. It was emphasised that isolation and loneliness can mean the difference between success and failure.

The “Circle of Support” graph was used to compare our own social networks to a typical service user’s networks and the result was clear. The service user had little or no positive social networks with a high level of professional involvement whereas our results indicated strong circles of friends and intimacy with little professional involvement.

Carol McNaughton, PATHE Research, Glasgow Simon Community, highlighted the role a lack of positive social networks played in routes into homelessness and as a barrier to progression. Carol emphasised the isolation, conflict and stigma experienced and the opportunity to break the cycle of homelessness through positive social networks. She highlighted the need for policy to address and support solutions such as mentoring, befriending and mediation and address the problems presented.

4. Strategies

The importance of strategies both nationally and locally in driving change was emphasised by a number of speakers. Points highlighted included:

- The need to measure progress made towards strategic goals. This means putting the correct measures in place to assess the impact of strategic decisions.
- The need to ensure that a person-centred approach continues to be integral to strategies, policies and procedures.
- The need for a holistic approach to prevention and resettlement.
- The need for local homelessness strategies to relate not only to national initiatives and objectives but to link with all other relevant local strategies that in turn should prioritise homelessness.
- The homelessness strategy and other partners’ plans give strategic direction but in addition, to ensure that the focus is right, better information on needs and gaps is required.

5. Range of Approaches

Speakers and participants gave examples of a range of projects designed to support the development or redevelopment of social networks. Some of these are highlighted below.

Mentoring/befriending

Scott Telfer, **Scottish Mentoring Network**, outlined the key elements of mentoring, its goal focused approach, primarily used at points of transition or change.

Emily Squire, **Scottish Business in the Community**, described their Ready for Work project and the role of the “buddy” during the placement and the recently introduced job coaching which offers mentoring support after the placement.

Biddy McDonald, **Move On**, explained how mentors support young care leavers during a period of transition to reach goals they set together.

Carolanne Reat, **Rock Trust**, highlighted how their Social Networks project uses a person centred approach and a range of provision – one to one support, group work, befriending and mentoring – to enable homeless and vulnerable young people (re)build social networks.

Frank Gow and two service users, **Quarriers Befriending Project**, outlined how befriending can be life changing for both the volunteer and service user.

Martin Mathieson, **South Lanarkshire Rough Sleepers Initiative**, described their flexible, holistic and person centred approach and range of services. Delegates were particularly interested in Nightstop which offers emergency accommodation and is an example of early intervention buying time to avoid/reduce the most damaging effects of homelessness. Rita Smith, **SoLVE**, outlined her volunteer befriending project which had developed out of the South Lanarkshire Rough Sleepers Initiative.

Alastair Cameron and colleagues from **Scottish Churches Housing Action**, outlined how their By My Side project is supporting the development of befriending projects and described how Fresh Start Edinburgh (which helps support newly re-homed people e.g. with starter packs) have developed a befriending project with 100% of participants sustaining their tenancies.

Mike Nicholson, **Befriending Network Scotland**, spoke about his organisation and the services it offers. With the Scottish Mentoring Network they are mapping befriending and mentoring provision.

A range of other provision was mentioned by participants including informal befriending and mentoring by service providers. Ian McPherson, **Positive Steps Partnership**, outlined their proactive approach to reducing social isolation and improving health and well being. This includes advocacy, support and opportunities to develop the skills and experience needed to reengage with the community.

Mediation

Claire Broadhurst, **Family Mediation Tayside and Fife**, described mediation, highlighted how effective mediation can be and outlined a new youth mediation project in Angus. Family mediation has demonstrated that mediation works effectively in the complex and often fraught atmosphere generated in family breakdown – young people leaving or being expelled from the family home and presenting as homeless is a form of family break down.

Robert Ballantine described how **SACRO** was developing homelessness mediation from their experience in community mediation. Community mediation has been shown capable of resolving apparently intractable and potentially violent situations. A pilot had been completed in East Lothian and work was being undertaken in North Ayrshire and Fife.

Brian Gibson advised that **Stirling Council** has recently appointed two mediators who will be based at the Bridge project. Mediation will not be a one off event but part of the young person's development.

South Ayrshire was probably the first homelessness mediation project run by Andrew Craig who operated as an independent mediator from within the housing and social work department - separate from other key staff working with the family but able to access support. Andrew has since move to another post.

North Ayrshire is looking at training housing support workers in mediation skills, **Glasgow** is reviewing the possibility of extending their existing community mediation service and indeed it is already being used in some situations where people are at risk of homelessness. In **Falkirk, East Dunbartonshire** and many other councils, homelessness mediation is a priority issue.

Many other projects supporting or with the potential to support the development of positive social networks were discussed and opportunities explored.

6. Issues

Across the seminars, a number of key issues emerged.

a. Know and exploit what is already there.

It was generally agreed that in most localities there is already a wide range of services which could support people affected by homelessness to rebuild their social networks. However, there is a lack of knowledge or accessible information on the existing services for either clients or workers. There is a need to network the networks. One suggestion was the provision of a local data base with information on services working to build and improve social networks and what their specific remit is. There was concern expressed about the boundaries, remit and the general work involved in such a data base.

It is not only lack of familiarity which leads to agencies not using services they should, it is occasionally due to issues such as professional elitism, protectiveness and trust. A more joined up approach is needed but this requires mutual trust, confidence in quality delivery and sharing of information with partner agencies. Problems exist in all these areas but they can be resolved. Part of that trust is sharing good practice between organisations and across Local Authorities.

It was suggested that there is an opportunity to link with mainstream services and projects providing mentoring, befriending and mediation even where their core role is not developing social networks or supporting people affected by homelessness and build it into their remit. We should use what is already there “smartly” and look at the scope to be creative with existing services as even small changes can make a significant difference.

b. More provision is needed

Despite (a.) above there is still a lack of provision.

- Existing projects have waiting lists.
- Services can be difficult to access due to time/geography.
- Services are spread too thinly, with too little time allocated to individual clients
- Participation is usually time limited which can result in support being withdrawn too soon.

It was felt that time spent on waiting lists is being used as a form of rationing but instead of reducing demand delays make the problems worse and more time consuming and costly.

c. Funding and priorities are all too often short term

Although the Scottish Executive have made £55million available this is not likely to be sufficient to meet the demand and aspirations of local authorities. Choices and priorities have to be made. These often seem to be short term with solutions, which might initially cost more but long term save more, overlooked. There are however massive problems to be addressed such as the city hostel closure programmes and the lack of affordable rural housing.

Not only are choices short termist but often the funding itself is short term and limited to a year or two. Funding for pilots but never for sustainable long term projects. Time and effort is wasted chasing different funding streams, understanding complex rules and developing projects to fit limited criteria. Criteria which exclude and result in a lack of services for particular groups e.g. 25-60 year olds.

d. Volunteers have an important, valued contribution to make

A range of concerns were raised about the use of volunteers: that they are not available; that they are taken for granted and used for paid work; that it can slow down the response to need for a service; that there are problems over disclosure etc. However service users and those involved with volunteers gave an overwhelming endorsement of the use of volunteers. It was clear that service users greatly value volunteers because they are there through choice and not because they are paid to be there. Service users buy into the process with volunteers where they fail to engage with professionals. Both are there because they want to be there. Typical quotes from service users about volunteers are that: “they don’t get at me”; “they don’t try to lay down the law”; “they’re there for me”. Volunteers help service users set their own agenda and generally undertake a very different role to the professional.

The project co-ordinators working with volunteers who were present at the seminars seem to have little difficulty recruiting volunteers and delays over disclosure seem to be less and there is no charge for disclosure for volunteers. Volunteers are trained and given support and supervision. Using volunteers is not a cheap option but a valuable and valued service.

The volunteers also value the experience, many finding it life changing or at least career changing. And in turn many service users want to give something back and get involved in volunteering in turn.

e. Mentoring and befriending to meet individual needs

Issues raised included:

- mentoring and befriending can be confused
- mentoring is not always appropriate for socially excluded individuals
- it can be a long time before there are any results

It was stressed that mentoring and befriending are part of a spectrum of support. Effective interventions take account of the individual's personal situation and what is the appropriate measure from that spectrum i.e.:

- crisis and acute isolation - buddying and befriending;
- degree of stability and engaging with opportunities - befriending and/or mentoring;
- motivated/thriving – mentoring.

Change is incremental over time with the mentor earning the right to trust. Mentoring and befriending relationships to develop social networks generally last some 12 to 18 months and the impact is thought to be even longer term. However the absence of long term research makes it difficult to prove this or to demonstrate the sustainability of the impact.

f. Mediation can be very effective

Concerns were expressed about the difficulty in mediating homelessness issues because of:

- The complexity and often long running nature of the issues.
- The imbalance of power between parties.
- The potential for abusive relationships.
- The danger of it being used to force a return to the family home.

Mediators involved in the seminars stressed that:

- Mediation should be voluntary with both parties willingly involved.
- The role of the mediator is to create a safe environment where the parties involved can explore the issues, express feelings, resolve conflicts and decide jointly what they think are the best options for them.
- The mediator should be independent and seek to develop effective communication and build consensus between the parties. They are not counsellors.
- Mediators are trained in mediation and conflict resolution and to handle complex and potentially explosive situations and to ensure equity and balance.

However, not all cases are appropriate for mediation and not all attempts at mediation are successful. It needs to be the right choice for the individuals involved. In addition cases where severe drug abuse, alcohol abuse and severe mental health needs are central to the dispute or where there are child protection issues may not be suitable.

It was also highlighted that:

- Mediation can be used to develop skills to prevent future problems.
- There needs to be close liaison between referrers and mediators to ensure (only) suitable cases are referred and that they are referred as quickly as possible.
- For some clients, advocacy may be required for them to access support.

Mediation is not generally available but a range of approaches to mediation and homelessness are being/are about to be piloted and lessons learned will be disseminated.

g. Communities need to be brought “on side”

Communities were seen as both a threat and an opportunity. There is often suspicion and a lack of community empathy and support from neighbours who sometimes have concerns about anti social behaviour, life style choices and cross cultural issues. At the same time SIPs and community organisations are well placed to help those at risk of homelessness develop positive social networks and efforts should be made to engage them in the process. Homelessness is everyone’s responsibility.

h. Early intervention is vital

Early intervention to prevent homelessness and to resolve homelessness quickly was seen as important.

Young peoples’ lack of life skills were seem as putting them at particular risk. It was thought that:

- Schools and education generally have a responsibility to undertake prevention work and skills training - get in before it is a problem.
- Schools mediation projects and peer mentoring are a positive way to building skills and confidence.

Mentoring and befriending should be use as prevention, not just cure

When people present as homeless or are identified as being at risk of homelessness there is a need to recognise and address social network issues at the initial assessment stage. Social networks support needs to continue even when clients have progressed to their own tenancy and are no longer receiving other housing support. Sometimes not enough time is allowed. Support should not be time limited but relate to need. Investment should be in families as well as individuals with parenting skills part of the prevention.

i. Structural problems remain

A number if issues were raised which were seen as underlying issues which make it more difficult to address social networks. These include:

- Lack of rural housing
- Lack of transitional, supported lodgings for young people previously looked after in local authority care to improve life skills
- Lack of affordable good quality, adequate sized (bed-sits) accommodation for single people – in relation to benefits

- Unrealistic housing benefit restrictions preventing re-settlement
- Benefit restrictions preventing progression to full-time education or employment
- Centralisation of services and lack of local delivery.

It was agreed that a holistic approach was required.

j. Measure “SMART” ly

While the measurement of services and demonstrating results was recognised as important a number of issues were raised:

- There is a danger that we focus on targets not clients.
- There is a need for qualitative measures not just quantitative.
- Outcomes and timescales need to be realistic.
- Concentrate on success and continual improvement not numbers or throughput.
- Services are valued by clients and thought by them to make a positive difference to their lives.

k. Involve service users

It was agreed that it is important it involve service users in developing services and to adopt a person centred approach. Issues include:

- Lifestyle choices
- Defining “positive” social networks
- Stigma
- Re-integration

l. Social networks keep you healthy

The close links between health, homelessness and social networks were highlighted.

- There is a need to link strategically.
- There is a need to link with and learn from existing provision such as mental health befriending projects.
- Health professionals need to be able to access/refer to mentoring, befriending and mediation services.
- More accessible services are required – GP, Dentist, Addiction etc.
- Social networks can support healthier lifestyles and access to services.

7. Conclusion

The success of these seminars is clearly demonstrated by the commitment to:

- address the issues
- partnership and co-ordination,
- start thinking out the box
- use existing resources more effectively and
- develop additional capacity.

Social Networks are now recognised as a vital part of an effective response to the prevention and resolution of homelessness and not just a nice to have addition. Opportunities and actions are being clarified but many issues still remain to be addressed.

More people involved in working to reduce homelessness now say, as Malcolm Chisholm, Minister for Communities in a recent reply to the Scottish Social Networks Forum Reference Group said, **“I share your view of the importance of positive social networks as a key factor in the prevention of homelessness and in finding sustainable solutions.”**

Over the coming months the Scottish Social Networks Forum will be making available information on case studies, evaluations, project design, developing support and research findings to help individuals, projects, voluntary organisations, companies, councils and ultimately the Scottish Executive take forward this vital agenda. This will be sent out via e-mailed newsletters and shortly on the website. But it is only through your commitment and action that changes will come.

Many people contributed to the success of these seminars. The formal “sponsors” and speakers are detailed on the attached list but thanks are due to everyone who attended and contributed to this process **and will take forward the agenda.**

Lesley Stenhouse
Scottish Social Networks Forum Co-ordinator

Thanks to the speakers, chairmen and facilitators of the events:

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