

CHiP practitioner article

Changing attitudes within homelessness

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'I needed to get to my starting line.'

This was a comment made by a Peer Educator from the Resettlement Training Service (<http://www.glasgowssimon.org/training.shtml>), and it serves to highlight that each person is unique and has their set of individual needs. This may be stating the obvious, but Resettlement Training Service course participants consistently comment on how badly they have been treated by some service providers. They feel that they are treated as a number, that they are labelled and not listened to and therefore are disempowered by the systems that they have to deal with.

It may be difficult to hear and acknowledge this reality, but as professionals, it is important that we listen to this feedback and look at how services can be improved to engage with groups of vulnerable individuals. This is especially important in light of Local Authority Homelessness Strategies, which include Service User Involvement and consultation regarding services and service provisioning.

Before getting to 'the starting line', this person had to deal with several barriers. Firstly, the feelings of trauma associated with becoming homeless, compounded by the fears and concerns of being thrust into unfamiliar surroundings. Questions were being asked that would determine *'where I'd be put'* and *'I was being asked to trust people I had never met with personal information relating to my situation. This was without knowing whether they would be able to help me or not'*. This person had to deal with a number of issues, that they deemed most important, before they could effectively engage with the services that would support them into their own tenancy.

Taking control

At the Resettlement Training Service, our remit is to provide information and advice in a way that will enable people to feel more in control of their situation and be better equipped to make informed choices, whilst navigating the process of their own resettlement. This is done through group work and shared experiential learning. Both practical and emotional issues are looked at in the group situation. For example: Housing Options and Housing Rights, how to furnish a flat, Coping with Isolation, Managing my Door, Money Advice, Refusing an Offer of a House etc.

Individuals join a group for a few days and the group facilitation allows them to explore options and choices that they will have, whilst developing a new lifestyle. The main aim of the service is to build people's confidence and this is achieved through the social process of group work. Individuals from various backgrounds realise that they have very similar fears and concerns about their experience of homelessness and this reduces the social isolation that people feel.

'I have learned a few new things, but mainly you have re-awakened many things that I have not had to think about for a long, long time.'

(Course Participant)

Peer Educators – sharing experiences

Peer Educators are key to the work undertaken by the project. A Peer Educator is someone who has been on a course and has experienced homelessness. They go on to do training on how to design and deliver a session on the courses. They deliver sessions on 'Coping with Change' and 'Managing on a Little Money' as part of the courses.

'Hearing that someone else has felt the same as I do and is now in their own flat has given me hope.'

(Course Participant after hearing a Peer Educator)

The combination of their homelessness experience and the positive impact of the information that they have gained from the courses on their own process of resettlement can inspire people to become Peer Educators with the Resettlement Training Service. They can then go out to hostel and supported accommodation projects and promote the courses, as well as provide key points of information. The Peer Educators can talk with confidence of their experiences of using the information and the services that they have encountered whilst being homeless. This obviously adds credence to the advice and information given. Presently, the service is working towards the National Standards for Housing Information and Advice facilitated by HomePoint, part of Communities Scotland.

Developing good working practice

The Peer Educators also deliver staff training. This training highlights the barriers that they encountered whilst trying to resettle. It also suggests learning points for staff teams by detailing what they considered to be good working practice, encouraging them to engage more freely than with other services.

The main point that the Peer Educators want people to take away is to treat people with respect, 'as a human being'. Agencies are asked to look at how they welcome people to their service. Is it friendly? Do people get greeted with a smile? Are procedures explained? In line with the Codes of Practice for those working within Social Services, there needs to be a consistent and qualitative approach to service provision. The worker you are allocated to should not determine what type of service you receive.

The Peer Educators say that it is a lot easier to cope with systems and the frustrations of systems, if things are explained in a way that is understandable and people are seen to be

valued. They ask what systems are in place to ensure that individuals do understand the information that they have been given? Is it sufficient to say 'Is that OK?' They think not! There needs to be a way in which your service ensures, as much as possible, that people are clear about what to do next so that people do not slip through and end up with no support or service provision.

It is key that professionals develop a keen understanding of the individual needs of people presenting to their service. Rather than prescribing a service to meet perceived needs, it is suggested that workers could develop ways of exploring what the person's actual needs are, as defined by the service user. For example, the person who made the statement about 'getting to the starting line' said they needed to be listened to and allowed to express the fears that they had regarding their homeless situation. Instead, they were given instructions about where to go, but the process that they were going to go through was not explained to them. Thus their fears were only heightened and panic set in. This resulted in them not being able to engage with the service providers, as the fears and worries around their current situation dominated their thoughts. Consequently it took a longer time for the person to get a service that could support them with their situation.

The Peer Educators want to ensure that people experiencing homelessness get relevant information as quickly as possible when they come into homelessness service provision.

Consultation process

The Peer Educators are making a very positive contribution to all levels of the implementation of the Homelessness Strategy in Glasgow. The group is part of the consultation process on how information could be provided in a more accessible way and has met with housing staff to design a leaflet to provide information to people presenting as homeless. This leaflet will be taken to the Homelessness Partnership group for comments.

'We know what questions people have in their heads when they go to the Hamish Allan and we want to give them information about their rights so they don't need to be as frightened as I was.'

The Peer Educators feel very much part of the strategy to tackle homelessness within the Glasgow and wider context. This is due to the feedback that they have gained while delivering sessions on the 'Working With Change' course, which is relevant to all staff working with vulnerable client groups. They can see real changes in attitudes:

'You have reminded me that I am working with people. I didn't realise the impact that I could have on a person by not acknowledging their fears or questions regarding their housing. I am going to change the way I work.'

(Staff course participant)

It is encouraging that the Peer Educators are part of a course that all staff, using the Joint Integrated Assessment Tool, will eventually attend. This is seen as a real commitment to raising awareness and understanding of Service User Involvement in service provisioning. One of the Peer Educators said that his confidence has grown so much:

'as by facilitating groups and staff training I feel really good as I know that what I have to say makes a difference to the way service users will now be treated'.

The message is simple. See people as human beings and set up organisations to have systems and procedures that put the person at the centre of service provision. You need to work with people so that they are part of determining their own solutions to their individual needs.

By changing attitudes, both organisationally and personally, it will make a potentially very difficult situation feel much more supportive to the person experiencing homelessness.

'See me first, then listen and that way we can work together'.

(Peer Educator at staff training course)

Further information

If you would like to contact Margaret-Anne for more information about her work, please email chip@shelter.org.uk in the first instance.