

Practitioner article

Social networks – why are they important to homeless people?

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Social networks

The **Scottish Social Networks Forum** is being established to raise awareness of the important role that mentoring, befriending and mediation services can play in enabling homeless people to rebuild positive social networks and to support organisations developing these services. It is a direct response by the Rock Trust and Communities Scotland to the Homelessness Taskforce recommendation that such initiatives should be nationally co-ordinated.

Lesley Stenhouse, as Co-ordinator of the Forum, discusses the importance of networks and network building in the lives of homeless people.

What do we mean by social networks?

There is so much talk of networking it all becomes confusing. We are not talking about networks of organisations but about **interpersonal relationships**.

Personal networks are made up of:

- family, friends, colleagues and acquaintances we each individually have.
- people we know and who we can chat to or call on for help, pass the time of day with or seek advice from.

We tend to take them for granted – when we have got them we probably don't think about them. It's easy to just pick up the phone or pop round for a chat. We don't think twice about calling up our Mums and ask how to boil an egg or our mates to go to the pub.

Research suggests that homeless people have very restricted social networks and therefore have very few people they can call on. The National Homeless Alliance report *Beyond Help* (O'Leary, 1997) found that 'homeless people... have fewer people in their primary support group' and that 'adults with a primary support group of 3 or fewer may be at greatest risk of experiencing mental health problems'. The most common reason given for being homeless is relationship breakdown whether with friends or family or partner.

We can start to see what this means in practice by looking at a couple of real examples (with names changed to protect identities).

Real Lives

These are just two cases out of many that demonstrate why the Homelessness Task Force final report emphasised the importance of positive social networks in both prevention of homelessness and successful resettlement.

Alan

'At last I can see a future for myself and feel that I have a chance.'

These are Alan's words now that he is starting to move away from a life of stealing, relationship breakdown and homelessness.

He got the support he needed to change his life through the Rock Trust's Social Networks Project targeted at young people who have suffered the trauma of homelessness and wish to (re)build positive networks of family and friends. The project co-ordinator supports the young people, matches them to trained volunteer befrienders/mentors and provides situations such as the photography group where they can practice social skills and gain confidence.

The process started in a small way when Alan made the difficult admission that he was stealing. He then progressed to recognising how this led to relationships breaking down. His next step, an enormous one for him, was to approach SACRO for help. Alan now sees that to move on and maintain relationships he needs to understand and control his stealing. Working with his befriender, who challenges his behaviour while continuing to be there for him, is enabling Alan to rebuild his confidence and self esteem.

Having learned the practical skills of independent living through supported accommodation, Alan's ability to maintain his tenancy were still threatened by loneliness and fear of going out. As Kate, another young person supported by the Rock Trust put it,

'the good thing about being homeless is that you get to meet loads of folk!'

Living alone in your own independent tenancy is very different but Alan no longer feels isolated and is confident that with the support of his friends he will be able to maintain his tenancy.

Mary

When Mary and her Mum had their really big bust up Mary ended up in a kids' care home, studying for her standard grades. She wanted to go back home but her Mum was not sure because she needed things to change first. They were offered and accepted mediation. From the initial individual meetings it was clear that there were a lot of seemingly trivial issues, mostly around mutual respect, that had built up. It took a marathon two and a half hour session to sort them out. Mum was always going into Mary's room even though it was supposed to be her private space. Mary pinched Mum's knickers. Mum expected to use the lounge if she had friends in while Mary was expected to take friends to her room. Mary felt that her Mum treated her like a child by not giving her money to manage her own affairs. Mum felt that Mary acted like a child and did not do her share around the house.

All this came out even before the classic parent/child issue of Mary's being out to all hours without letting Mum know where she was and when she would be in was raised.

The mediation worked through it all getting agreement on all the small issues that had accumulated and bringing out into the open all the underlying fears and jealousies about boyfriends etc (Mum's as well as Mary's). Mary would make the tea when she got home from school and phone before 10.30 if she was going to be late home. Mum would give Mary her Child Benefit as an allowance and share the lounge and so on. Perhaps most importantly they had started talking to each other again. Last heard the agreement was still holding!

So back to the original question, why are social networks so important?

Family breakdown may have brought about the crisis but isn't it the lack of housing that has made a 'drama out of a crisis' as the advert says? After all isn't it more important to offer homeless people the practical things they need; a roof, furniture, advice on benefits and specialist professional help with health or addiction problems? The answer to that is, 'yes, it is important but it is not the whole picture'.

Some would say that all these things, the drink, the drugs and even the homelessness itself, are the symptoms not the disease and argue that what we are offering is palliative care not a cure. What is clear is that true re-inclusion consists of more than somewhere to live and help to abandon 'bad habits'. Everyone needs the informal support of family, friends and acquaintances

Supporting research

The effect of a lack of social inclusion as a contributing factor to homelessness are shown in research:

- In the Lemos & Crane survey for *A Future Foretold* (Lemos and Goodby, 1999) over half of their homeless respondents ascribed their homelessness, at least in part, to the breakdown of a relationship or to losing a partner.
- The JRF findings paper on family support for young people setting up home (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1995) found that half of those who did not get support from family had been homeless at some point. The lack of support was more likely where it was a stepchild or where the family was subject to some crisis.
- The *Young, Drifting and Black* (Steele, 1997) and *Minority Ethnic homelessness in Glasgow* (Lemos and Crane, 2004) reports found that black and minority ethnic people are over represented in the homelessness statistics and encounter proportionally greater feelings of isolation.

- In the Pathe Project final report, *Crossing the Continuum*, Carol McNaughton (2005) says that one of the 'Key barriers to resettlement identified by the research ... (was) ... isolation and the influence of social networks.'
- The *Summary of Research for the Homeless Task Force* (Communities Scotland, 2001) found that 'A theme which ran through nearly all of the Task Force reports was the importance of restoring or creating supportive social networks for homeless people.'

Paradoxically the research also shows that staying homeless provides a way to avoid being alone offering 'company' and 'community':

- More than a quarter of those questioned for *Prevention Is Better than Cure* (Randall and Brown, 1999) said friends on the street were a significant factor in staying there.
- This was confirmed in Glasgow Homeless Network's report *Where will they go?* (Glasgow Homelessness Network, 2003) which found that 'a significant number who took part said that they wanted to remain in homelessness. There were clearly positive aspects to living in homelessness including staff support, company, and safety as well as negative aspects of tenancies such as loneliness and the responsibility of running a home.'

Resettlement

It is clear, then, that the lack of a social network can have an influence on becoming homeless but what about when homeless people are re-settled, what happens then?

Repeat homelessness in Scotland (Scottish Homes, 2001) highlights that 'within the 9-10,000 homeless households re-housed by local authorities each year, around 3,500 do not sustain their tenancies – most of the 'tenancy failures' taking place within 6 months'.

Not only does this repeat homelessness represent a huge drain on public resources both in terms of money and staff time but also this failure of the system is felt all too often as a personal failure by the 3,500 individuals and families involved and is hugely destructive to them.

Why does resettlement fail?

Lemos (2000) reports that 'with no friends or family, homeless people who have succeeded in finding somewhere decent to live may still feel lost. Their only friends may be back on the streets, so they return.'

Innumerable papers report on the social isolation of the homeless person re-housed and cite this as the main reason for resettlement failure. Sometimes this is because of the location they are re-housed to which is perhaps away from friends and family or perhaps

because of a perceived lack of security when leaving their new home. It can also be a result of moving away from their only friends, even when this is through choice because the 'friends' are recognised as 'bad'. Returning to a social network with a negative influence may seem appealing in the total absence of any other.

So it could be argued that a breakdown or lack of positive social networks is both a cause and effect of homelessness and can be exacerbated by resettlement attempts potentially. To resolve homelessness we must enable homeless people to build or rebuild their social networks.

Re Building Social Networks

Following on from the *Homelessness Task Force Final Report* (Scottish Executive, 2002), local authorities are now required 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 covering support for the development of positive social networks in their homelessness strategies. This is an issue of increasing priority for the Scottish Executive, Communities Scotland and local authorities. The Task Force recommended that 'All projects serving homeless people should pursue strategies to promote and support opportunities for positive social interaction.'

There are many ways in which new and existing services for homeless people can be designed to help them develop positive social networks. Here are some examples:

- The Glasgow Homelessness Network (2003) report highlighted the isolation of the large hostels, the necessity for support and the importance of the provision of accommodation for different groups of homeless people with shared interests to help with creating communities.
- In its shared properties the Rock Trust has weekly house meals followed by house meetings. This is a practical method of managing the tensions of shared living but also a 'social' opportunity.

The suggestion is that, in addition to better design of services, new provision targeted at social networks should be developed. *Dreams Deferred* (Lemos and Durkacz, 2002) highlighted that 'Above all support workers will need to be able to recognise... when it would be appropriate to refer the service user to a specialist service.' As potential methods of doing this, the Task Force identified **mediation, befriending and mentoring** as key in building and rebuilding social networks.

None of these are new ideas. For example:

- family mediation is well developed and should be available across Scotland.

- befriending of old people isolated in the community or of children at risk is well established.
- all the HR gurus have been promoting mentoring for employee development for years.

Some of the clients of all these services will be homeless or at risk of becoming homeless but it is only recently that they have been focused on helping homeless people develop strong positive social networks.

Mediation

The range of mediation services available in Scotland is growing. Families, communities and pupils are now provided for. There are services in youth justice and now a few pilots in homelessness.

The majority of homeless people or potentially homeless people want to retain or re-establish contact with friends and particularly with family but often feel that things have been said and done which are a barrier to this. Sometimes raising the individual's confidence may enable them to address the issues themselves, sometimes another family member can act as a go between but often if common ground is to be re-established outside independent mediation is required, as we saw with Mary earlier.

Befriending

The success of befriending services in reducing social isolation and encouraging social integration and involvement has been demonstrated and reported in a range of reviews. Again, targeting it at homeless people and using it to develop their social networks is relatively new. Evaluation is not easy but we have seen:

- demand from the target group who say that it makes a significant difference.
- that the volunteers are valued by the clients and both volunteers and clients report satisfaction.
- that projects can demonstrate progress in developing social networks and in sustaining tenancies.

Mentoring

Mentoring is seen as a goal focused activity and has been used quite frequently in business. Perhaps not surprisingly then the model has been most successful in relation to supporting socially excluded groups, including homeless people, into education, training and employment. This has been achieved by offering extra support in both securing the opportunity and in continuing, successful participation. Because work places, colleges and so on are the clubs we all use to build our social contacts, success in these areas, especially when supported by a mentor, builds social networks.

Scottish Social Networks Forum

The Homelessness Task Force recommended that:

'A national co-ordination role should be created to build and co-ordinate local mediation, befriending and mentoring services for homeless people across Scotland.'

In response to their report and because of the success of their Social Networks project, the Rock Trust joined with Communities Scotland to host a national post to promote and support the development of Social Network projects for homeless people across Scotland and develop the **Scottish Social Networks Forum**. The Forum is being established to raise awareness of the important role mentoring, befriending and mediation services can play in enabling homeless people to rebuild positive social networks and to support organisations developing these services.

Further information

In my role as co-ordinator I am developing a portfolio of:

- case studies covering a range of delivery methods and the personal stories of individuals helped or in some cases not helped;
- monitoring and evaluation techniques used;
- training and accreditation used or offered.

This information will be used in articles such as this and in an e-mail **newsletter** from April 2005. A series of seminars will be held across Scotland in May to highlight national issues and discuss local solutions. Standard Life is seconding a part-time member of staff to help organise and run the **seminars**. Eventually it is hoped that a comprehensive bank of information will be available through the Scottish Social Networks **website** which will be established later this year.

To ensure that you receive your copy of the newsletter and details of the seminars, please send me your e-mail address (lesley.stenhouse@rocktrust.org) and if your time allows, I'd love to hear from you on any or all of the following topics:

- Are you involved in (or considering) mediation, befriending, mentoring for homeless?
- What is your experience?
- What are the issues to be addressed?
- What would you want the Forum to do?

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