



Groundswell, March 2006

Being Supported

Homeless People's views on the Supporting People Programme



The Supporting People programme was launched in April 2003, to provide housing related support services to vulnerable people, including people who are homeless, in order enable them to live more independently. This report was commissioned and funded by the ODPM as part of its consultation on a strategy for taking forward the Supporting People programme.

Groundswell is the leading charity working in the field of user involvement in the homelessness sector. The charity's core belief is that homeless people are not the problem and must be part of the solution. They hold the key to solutions within their experience and have a right to information to make choices about their own lives.

In February and March of 2006 Groundswell conducted a series of five focus groups with homeless people around the country. Focus groups were held in a variety of projects to ensure a spread of opinions and experiences.

- A drop in centre in the South West
- A young people's project in the Midlands
- An Asian women's refuge in the North East
- A frontline hostel in London
- A floating support and drop in project in a semi-rural location just outside Durham

In all 52 homeless people were consulted. The ODPM's stated aim is to deliver effective user-focused services. The aim of this consultation exercise was to find out from homeless people themselves, what they believe constitutes an effective service, which services they found useful and which were not.

The views reflected in this report are those of the service users and Groundswell and not the ODPM.

Groundswell

Mission

Supporting homeless people to create their own solutions to homelessness.

Aims

To enable homeless people to set up and run their own projects

To increase homeless people's influence in policy and decision making.

To increase homeless people's meaningful involvement in the services they use.

Objectives

To support homeless people in setting up projects through grant award schemes, training and fundraising advice.

To support a network of homeless led projects to promote the exchange of ideas and best practice.

To create opportunities for homeless people to campaign and lobby local and national decision-makers.

To develop and deliver user involvement strategies for service providers.

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Moving Towards Independence

Focus group participants were asked to think about their journey through homelessness and asked to consider which services had been useful and which had not.

People's experiences in accommodation

"They are saying that it's a service that promotes, like, independence but ...they are like looking to hold your hand. ... we want to get out on our own two feet but they are making it difficult. (It) seems like the services are saying they are promoting independence... but really that's not the case; they are looking for you to be like under them, to keep you needy."

"It's not what services. It is how you offer it to them"

"I feel like a statistic for the Home Office, not a human being. It's degrading and impersonal, and I don't like it."

As eloquently expressed above, people had a clear sense that the way in which services were delivered, and the way people were treated, had an impact on the degree to which people felt able to move towards independent living. A general message was that the way people were treated was very important in determining whether people developed new skills or lost the ones they already had.

"We just want to sort our lives out. They tell you to stand on your own two feet, but they don't let you do it. They are living our lives for us."

As we can see, at times people found they were not allowed to carry out simple day to day tasks for themselves in their accommodation. Important factors seemed to be people feeling respected, being given some privacy and being allowed to have relationships with others.

"I was empowered by staff and management and gained confidence and self-esteem day by day. And the biggest thing for me is that there are policies and procedures in place at this hostel, and equal opportunities, everyone is equal. They're not the same, but they're all equal and treated with respect."

"You feel patronised all the time, and we are not all the same, there are loads of different backgrounds that we come from. You are treated like an idiot."

Respect

"There's no move on from that place, no right to self-determination - you have a quibble it's either shut up or shove off. That's how it's set up and that's how it functions."

"It's about being treated like human beings."

As we can see from these statements, respect took different forms. People felt aggrieved when their own knowledge and attempts to take control of their lives were not respected. Sometimes people felt they were subject to hostel rules that were arbitrary or insulting, such as having curfews when people were in their twenties. Perhaps more importantly people felt that if they were not respected, they would feel worse about themselves and even start deteriorating.

Privacy

A lack of privacy was seen as a negative factor in many projects. This was a part of people's sense that they weren't being treated like adults.

"I'm on nights at the minute and I was sleeping yesterday, and they demanded to get into my room, saying it had to be done, health and safety, health and safety, my arse"

"They give us a letter and say we are going to come in on so-and-so day but they still come in on other days as well. They chose to do what they want to do. They got your key and they do what they want."

"Some of the local projects were extremely intrusive. To the point where a lot of people would say fuck it, I'd be better off in jail."

"They have a key, they just walk in. They have a look to make sure it's tidy. It's like what are you, my mother?"

"Yeah and you get the key to your room. You don't have to be let in and out. You can let yourself in and out and you've got more privacy."

experiences in accommodation

"It's daft, nobody's allowed into your flat, not even for a drink of water. Like me mam came to visit today, and I let her in to use the toilet and my key worker says, nobody's allowed in here. I says it's me mother."

You're not allowed family. You used to be allowed immediately family. You're not allowed kids either, I have a daughter and I'm not allowed to bring my daughter up, I have to go elsewhere."

As the first quote illustrates, one particularly intrusive measure was random room inspections. Afterwards the individual explained that if they were checking to see he was alive then they could hear this by him speaking to them. If it was because they suspected that he was 'doing no good', then they should say this. While there are health and safety considerations, some individuals felt that this was being played upon at worst or at least that privacy was not seen as important, them being guests who should feel grateful for any accommodation at all. As we can see it is the randomness and arbitrary nature of room inspections that people found particularly demeaning. It seemed that workers and agencies are missing the importance of privacy in a person developing self esteem and regaining dignity.

Relationships with others

Rules on not allowing friends or relatives into one's room made it difficult to maintain relationships with family and friends. Studies have shown that the loss of such 'social capital' can be a major barrier to homeless people succeeding in building independent lives.

"Yeah, I was in XXXX, and I got kicked out because there was a complaint made that I was kissing my partner outside, someone complained, they didn't like it, they said if you want to leave we'll make you leave."

"Some people draw strength from their relationship, and if you're in a constructive relationship, the last thing you want to do is lose that support. And I think it should be taken into consideration when people are assessed and communicated with."

A particular dimension of this was the importance of being allowed to have relationships. This seemed to take three dimensions. Rules that actively discouraged or punished people for having relationships, a lack of understanding about the importance and potentially positive impact of having a relationship and structural discrimination against couples. The following couples illustrate these dimensions and positively, that homeless people recognise them including the importance of a relationship.

"Me and my other half have got mental problems and we want to be moved together but they will not...we are being split up - there has to be place that takes couples, there has to be?"

Lemos (2006) recently wrote about all these dimensions and called for agencies to rethink how it engages with homeless people about relationships, to value them and to look at how it is inadvertently, and sometimes overtly, discriminating against couples. "Vulnerable or homeless people should not be assumed to be single now and forever. On the contrary, many are already in relationships and many are busy starting them up. These relationships are sometimes longstanding and a profound source of well-being to the people involved." (Lemos: 2006 pp 81).



Agency size

The relative size of agencies was seen as a major factor in the quality of service they were able to deliver. Smaller agencies and those with a higher staff to client ratio were seen as the most effective. Larger projects could be chaotic with a mixed variety of needs not all of which could be addressed within that environment.

"Smaller is better. If you get too many people living together, with different support needs and life skills, you get a mix that gets to the point where nobody's getting help and they're just trying to keep away from each other's throats."

The agency that was seen as most effective in addressing all of clients needs including benefits and housing had six staff for eight residents. Though this client/staff ratio may be unrealistic for most projects very low ratios make it difficult to give clients the necessary level of care.

The importance of effective workers

Most participants identified the relationship between them and staff, and their key worker in particular, as the most important factor in whether they felt they had received an effective service.

"What we have to remember is that key workers are human at the end of the day and they might have had a bad day too. It's very easy to project your own feelings onto other people. There is no cardboard cut out of the perfect worker, it's just somebody who can be flexible, not too stiff, not follow the rules too much and just bend the rules a little bit - sometimes if you just bend a little bit, it helps things run more smoothly."

"What she's also saying is that basically whatever she's managed to accomplish while she's been there and after is down to the help of the workers."

"They give you more choices. They make you do less. The little things matter. Like getting a drink of water. You shouldn't be begrudged a drink of water. Some of them are ridiculous."

Being able to develop a relationship with a key worker was seen as very significant. Perhaps as significant given the previous discussion is that relationships with agency staff especially key workers were determinant on whether participants felt they had received a good service and what level of choice they had. There seemed to be three positive characteristics people were looking for: that the worker was seen to care and be there for the person, that they actively listened to them, and they understood the dynamics of the homeless experience.

Caring and being there

Workers who were viewed most positively were those who were empathetic and who went out of their way to assist their clients. Linked to this were the issues of time, people felt that they need to feel that the person wanted to be there and was not just doing a job.

"She's always felt like she can approach staff with any problems, and they've been very, very helpful."

"(I want) someone who'll give you time and actually look at your needs. You know when the time comes up and they've got to go they (bad workers) are actually sitting there in front of everyone going yeah man looking at their watch like I'm gonna leave you in a bit, I'm gonna be leaving in a bit."

"Not necessarily been there but someone who cares and understand."

One volunteer was quite incised about an incident when someone questioned him about his motivations for being a volunteer, Positively, he turned this around and was very articulate about what he wanted and expected from a worker.

"They asked me why do you like to help people? And I look at them dead in the eye and say why do you ask me that question when you work here. I say you work here, why do you ask me why do you want to help people. I say didn't you join this job for the fact you want to help people."

A sense of commitment seemed important to clients, they had to feel that the worker was there for the right reasons and would give them their all. People did not necessarily expect that the person would burn themselves out, but certainly that they would be flexible to a persons needs and be prepared to go the extra mile, as the next two quotes illustrate.

"They had actually closed by the time I got there but they opened and I was with them until they found a place for me."

"Personally I feel that actual staff members don't give a hundred percent. I reckon they really need a passion for helping homeless people to get into this type of work."

Listening to people

While listening was not a subject of major discussion it featured most commonly as a reaction to the question of the most important quality they look for in a worker. Examples include:

- Someone that listens and understands.
- Someone that don't patronise you and they listen to you
- People that listen to you and go out of their way to help you
- People who actually listen to you and know more.

Understanding of the dynamics of the homeless experience

Staff who appreciated the difficulties clients might have in achieving goals but were still supportive were highly regarded.

"They understand that you might not be able to get out of bed in the morning and go to your courses, that you might be ill and the first thing you want to think about is getting better, and they actually understand about things like that."

They try and learn about people and where they come from, that's what we do on the course on a Thursday. Just the fact that someone wants to help and understand."

Many participants felt that the best workers were ones who had had personal experience of being homeless. For others the issues was not so much that they had been homeless, but that they took active steps to understand things from the homeless persons perspective. Others again made the link between personal experience of homelessness and commitment.

"There was a girl that worked here that was brilliant because she'd lived in a hostel herself and she knew the score. She had been homeless"

"If they've got the point of view of someone who's been through it helps them get a perspective they didn't have before and understand more."

"Not necessarily been there but someone who cares and understand. Someone who can empathise with you but not sit there and say I know how you are feeling because they don't most of the time. If someone says they can empathise with you it is better because you believe them. How can they know how you feel they have never been in that situation, that's when I stop listening because they are saying phrases they have read from a sociology book, using terminology that they don't even understand?"

"They aint experienced the life we've lived cos 2 out of 10 have been that life and they are the ones that will bend over backwards for you, they are the ones that will go that extra mile but what about the other 8 of them?"

Sharing other characteristics such as age also made it easier for clients to relate to staff. It also seemed that if they were not then it was still important that the person was genuine about their experience.

"Basically they were more like in with our sort of age init? They were young at heart, they wanted to know. They could relate to you, man"

"I'm trying to say that the staff, yeah are too like detached from the young people's situation. Know what I'm saying? They can't relate anymore."

Other factors with workers

"I've seen a lot of staff members coming in and going out. I've seen new faces, old faces and new faces. Now, the only people that seems to be serious about their job are the people who have been there from the start. They are the people who come up to you and really want to know."

"What they fail to understand is everywhere, every time they are changing their workers they are breaking their support services cos how many times do they think people are going to confide into someone, to relate to someone, build a rapport with someone for it to be broken, to be next month having to tell the same storyline to a next person."

"A lot of people with alcohol, speaking about myself, are most vulnerable at night time, and you used to have locum workers at night that were awful and they didn't know what they were talking about"

Lack of continuity was seen as undermining the move to greater independence. Often clients were seen by many different workers and this was seen negatively. Its importance was linked back to the importance of having a solid relationship with a worker as a foundation but also so that people had a sense of movement and not feeling that they were being perpetuated in a system or going round in circles. Linked to this was a very negative experience of Locum workers, who were not viewed as being effective.

There was belief that greater bureaucracy meant that workers were able to spend less time on vital face-to-face work.

"Too much money is spent on management and bureaucracy and not where it should be spent - on the front line."

The importance of continued support

"I had been institutionalised for most of my life and lived on the streets for many years. After the hostel they sent me to XXXXX and it got me used to independent living, but as soon as I got my flat, my support just finished. So I had to get back on the street just to get support again, and the same thing is happening again today, people are not learning by their mistakes."

As illustrated, people generally felt that support was fairly good on the whole in hostels but once people moved into lower support hostels there was a disproportionate drop in support, when actually people needed help in the transition periods at least.

"All the services seem to disappear once you're on low support. I am a low support resident... once you get into housing it all becomes about buck passing. There is no consideration about social housing. And that is a big issue in the room. And no one does that because it's expensive."

Conversely some found that hostels treated everyone the same, regardless of need and that this was not equal treatment but discriminatory.

"Everyone is treated the same, my hostel is changed to high support where they introduced room checks. And so you still have low support people living there but they are treated to the same room checks too."

People also felt that being re-housed did not signify the end of people's need for support.

"I think even if I was independent I would still want some kind of support everyday. Someone to talk to for an hour every day."

Floating support services were seen as vital in maintaining tenancies and allowing people to live independently. One participant was 16 when she was re-housed, with no support her tenancy quickly broke down. In one agency which was viewed as very effective floating support was delivered through a peer-support scheme. Some may need some support for a very long time, perhaps forever, or at least to be safe in the knowledge that there was someone they could talk to if they felt a 'wobble'.

The importance of a safe environment

More generally people felt that a safe environment was important. This was particularly the case for the focus group of women who had been through domestic violence, but seems applicable to anyone whose previous accommodation was an unstable and unsafe one. Its importance seems again linked to the ability to rebuild trust, self-esteem and dignity. People were again voting with their feet if they did not feel safe even if objectively they were receiving the help they needed.

"I gained confidence and self-esteem day by day. And the biggest thing for me is that there are policies and procedures in place at this hostel, and equal opportunities, everyone is equal. They're not the same, but they're all equal and treated with respect."

"I stayed at a hostel for quite some time and got the help I needed, but she felt she was at risk so she had to leave."

"Doors closed at 9, but they used to leave doors open. Key workers didn't stay at night, some people were allowed to go out, and left the doors open. It was very crowded, and I didn't feel safe. I decided to leave that hostel."

Prohibitive rents

It is worth noting that while Supporting People has alleviated the most exorbitant rent and broken the link between support and housing benefit, it still remains an issue. One of the biggest barriers to moving into employment and towards more independent living remains the level of rents within hostels. Contrary to stereotypes most participants were keen to work but felt that it risked them losing their accommodation through an inability to pay high rents, and becoming homeless again.

"I really want to get a job man I do, but I can't, I can't afford to pay the rent."

The importance of preventative work

It was felt that there was a need not only to inform the general public of the services that were available if they should become homeless, but also to educate them on the realities of homelessness, in order to try and prevent it. In the young people's agency in the Midlands clients were involved in a project to go into schools to talk to pupils about their experiences of homelessness.

"If every school knew or every school had at least a housing association list just to inform people that there is a place to go in terms of if anything serious is gonna happen. Cos it is all about prevention. People just don't know about this project. If people would know then people would come."

Reactions to negative services

It is worth noting that where people did not get the help they needed they took matters into their own hands. Several people reported doing this, including presenting themselves, as they knew the agency would become receptive to working with them. However, as the third comment illustrates this can be done in the knowledge that they actually do need help, but are just not getting it. The second comment is interesting, as it bemoans how agencies do not take into account the degree to which people help themselves and each other. This has been noted by other authors such as Neale (1994: 1996) who think we should have much more emphasis on developing clients' own support structures networks and build on their own informal networks. Particularly important when people are going to eventually have to rely on such networks when they are out on their own.

“Where nothing is happening, you have to take your own action, yeah. And it doesn't help when people are ignoring what you are saying. Especially when you are in a position you can't live with for too long.”

“And there is no sense of community that you get from living in a hostel. It works and you can support each other, and I don't understand why we cannot be empowered to help ourselves.”

“I'm trying to get information from him but I can't get it how it is so I have to fill in some of the gaps myself, you get me...experience has taught me if you want something done you do it yourself but in reality we do need help”

Joined Up Delivery?

Focus group participants were asked to consider whether agencies worked effectively together, and whether they had had difficulties in accessing or getting to services.

Generally, comments were not favourable, reflected in one client's comments on sitting in on their own case conference.

"They couldn't communicate with one another at all. I was sat there thinking, why can't you talk to one another? It was all infighting. They couldn't all join in and get something sorted out. It was a waste of time."

The debate about a central Hub

Participants felt that a central place to access information about services would be helpful. An example was given of an agency in Bristol, which people knew to go to for any information they needed if they were homeless.

"I've found that Bristol was excellent for homeless people. There's a place called The Hub, and they'd get you in a B&B or a hostel, they always find you somewhere, every time I went in there, it were great."

In most cases agencies acted as filters deciding client's access to other services. In some cases this was to the benefit of the client.

"Depends on your situation doesn't it. If you're street homeless your first point of contact would probably be XXXXXX. Who would then filter you on to various other projects?"

However there was the risk that whether a referral happened depended on individual workers view of other services.

"Because my support worker does like the project for some personal or political reason, I was not made aware of it. And because I'd accessed an education course, the woman there told me about it, and I filled in a form, and bang I was in there in a month".

"But the internal politics at XXXXXXXX means they really don't like the people I'm now with and would never have referred me to them. I was homeless for 9 months because my worker in her finite wisdom decided she didn't like the nature of this project. I'd been homeless for 6 years and didn't even know the thing existed"

"There's a lot of strife between projects, probably because they're all going after the same money, but it's very badly directed and there are some very poor projects being funded extremely well. And very good ones shutting down."

Politics of funding

Several participants raised the issue of funding as a factor in agencies not working together effectively. It was felt that agencies were competing for the same pots of money and it was therefore not in their interests to work together. It was also felt that larger agencies were better able to compete for funds due to their bigger infrastructure while small more effective agencies were losing funds.

"Yeah talking, communicating, agreeing instead of arguing. Coming to a result."

"That's where problems occur isn't it cos like some services won't give information out on some people cos like it's their policy. and some other services might give out a whole information do you know what I mean."

"It's because they have to do their paperwork in triplicate, one bit goes to the home office, one bit goes to their supervisor and one goes to someone else, and so there are 3 bits of paper and one will always get lost, and usually that is the one that is going to the person that will help you progress."

"Well to be honest we cannot really give you examples, because we are not in at that end of the telephone. All we know is what we have said to our key workers is meant to get passed on to a 2nd or 3rd party and it doesn't always get there."

Communication issues

Many people put agencies inability to work together down to communication issues. However behind this there were several other factors, from inconsistencies in confidentiality protocols to paperwork to being missed out of the loop themselves. One client discussing the subject afterwards questioned the skills base of workers. He was not doubting that they were often skilled in front line skills such as advocacy but wondered whether this necessarily equipped them to being able to work with other agencies, particularly in group settings such as interagency forums.

Referrals

Clients are often signposted to other agencies in an inefficient way, proper referrals were rare. Participants had had experience of being given a lot of information but still feeling ill equipped to deal with their issues.

"Well yes, they'd say we can help you, you'd spend three hours with them with no actual practical help and then they'd refer you to another three agencies. So in the end you have 16 agencies but no practical help"

Clients were also expected to travel from agency to agency which was very difficult due to the costs involved when most people were in receipt of benefits.

"They also expect you to travel all over London but they do not give you any fare, and you say how do you get there and so they photocopy you a map." "In my hostel they do not talk to each other, and in some cases there is even tension between different sections of x. And the staff are stupid sometimes, they do not even know some of the other people in the same hostel that they work with."

Co-ordination within agencies

There was a sense that in larger agencies there was often not even effective co-ordination of services within the agency, leading to clients missing out on services they require.

"In my hostel they do not talk to each other, and in some cases there is even tension between different sections of x. And the staff are stupid sometimes, they do not even know some of the other people in the hotel that they work with."

Benefits

Participants had often had difficulties in accessing their correct benefit entitlement. There was little co-ordination between the homelessness agencies as the benefits agencies.

"Never want to let out money. Don't even pressure them about community care grant and this and that. You are offered a loan quicker than you are offered a community care grant or a crisis grant."

Good practice example

Its clients saw the Asian women's refuge as being part of a joined up approach between agencies. Most clients had been referred by the police who had been their first point of contact; police with appropriate language skills had been available. Once in the refuge workers ensured that benefit claims were sorted out quickly, this was in part a result of staff having a good working relationship with the benefits agency. The refuge was part of a housing association, which gave clients priority for re-housing.

Chapter Three: Choice and control over services

Focus group participants were asked if they felt they had enough say in the services they used. They were also asked to consider how they would like to be involved and what would enable this to happen.

Choice over which services are received

There was a great desire to have more choice and control over services received. However for many the reality was that, as discussed in the previous chapter, participants felt they had little control over which services they received. Once they had entered an agency that often acted as a filter to other services. Accessing services could often be based on the preferences of individual staff. Sometimes this extended clients not being consulted about the other services they were being referred to.

"I will tell you what I am annoyed about is my resettlement work - and he didn't speak to me about it or anything. He has put me up for a place in XXXX, which I knew nothing about."

In rural areas there was no real concept of choice between services as services are very limited. This was not always about geography. If it were a specialist services such as ones for domestic violence, there would still be little choice in services.

"What choice is there really? There's only one hostel in miles"

"There were people there who had no choice, with two or three kids, and I didn't feel they were very helpful, and the only reason people were living there was because they had no other options."

Reactions to lack of choice were not all to accept their lot. Some people actively voted with their feet rather than engage with negative services.

"I've been through others (services) that were bloody awful. I've found it better to walk out with a sleeping bag than being resident in some of these projects."

"It didn't work out. I walked away, thus becoming homeless for the next 9 months."

Choice and control within services

Once participants had accessed services their control over how that service was delivered was often limited. Perceived arbitrariness was seen as particularly difficult, when rules and regulations could be changed overnight with no consultation with clients.

"We are told what rules we have to obey and these rules could change overnight and we wouldn't know, and then we get kicked out of the house for 24 hours for breaking a rule that we didn't know had changed."

There was enthusiasm for greater involvement in shaping services though it was recognised not everyone would want to become involved. There was a general view that services, which listened to their clients and took on board their views, were more effective than those that did not. *"Clients should be involved in the running of the place. And there are only a few people I know in each hostel that can but it would help them."*

Experiences of involvement

People's experiences of user involvement were generally negative. Several factors were mentioned in why this was, the time it took for things to change, lack of adequate feedback and a questioning of the role of third parties, through which user involvement is normally mediated.

"The hardest thing for us is putting in effort and not getting any result. It just knocks you back down a few steps. You feel bad, you feel why am I putting in all this effort."

"It's a good idea in principle but if nothings really happening. You want to follow up on something straight away to see how it's going. You want someone to like keep in contact with you and tell you I've looked into it, I've spoken to this person this week and I'll get back to you next week. That just doesn't happen and that causes frustration."

"I think if people have a comment or something on their mind they need to go directly to the person that can sort it out. There is always a third party which probably has an influence in the way that that's like, brought across."

Some just doubted the agencies motives for such initiatives, identifying fear on behalf of workers as a factor.

"That is back to them being scared. Because if they allowed us to all do our aims yeah, think about it, cos we've all got potential, we've seen it all. They'd be out of a job because the next generation's come up to offer a better service."

involving and developing clients

"So now what we do on the project now is get everybody that wants to be on life skills and advertise and putting up like posters for it. And do a whole new workshop, we are running our own workshops now."

Clients were involved in a project to go into schools to talk to pupils about the realities of homelessness. The agency had also set up a Youth Advisory Board, the board was in its early stages but participants were positive about its potential. The intention was to liaise with senior staff and to be involved in issues such as recruitment.

"From the HR side with the reps and because of the Youth Advisory Board, we are kind of working alongside the HR rep and we've got a meeting on Monday alongside members of staff from head office to find out what input we will have, like interviews. As we said young people should get the chance to interview a member of staff with their questions and Head Office are fully aware of that so we've got a meeting on Saturday."

Employment of ex-service users

There was a strong feeling that people who had used services were very well placed to become workers in homeless agencies. This was particularly so given early comments about them valuing those workers who had either had, or could at least appreciate, the experiences that people had been through. There was frustration that agencies put up barriers to allowing this to happen.

*"I want to be a drugs worker. But I've been told I can't be a drugs worker while I'm living in a hostel. Now I think I'd make an excellent drugs worker cos I've come off heroin, I've come off crack come out of jail, stayed clean and I don't rob no more do you know what I mean. And I could influence people. Look I could do it man but I can't."
The people there, why not use them? They are standing right there in front of you.*

Participants found it frustrating that agencies often had arbitrary time limits on how long after leaving service clients could apply for work or even to volunteer.

"What is the point building someone up, yeah? Me, I come from jail, didn't wanna work didn't want to do nothing nothing, come to x, seventeen months laid out at schools, hours from millennium volunteers believing that I would get somewhere to be told, oh well because you lived in a hostel you have to wait a year."

Incentives

Some participants felt there were few incentives to become involved; one suggestion was that people should be paid for their time.

"For example if we had a wage then there would be so much more we could do. But that is the thing it's not foreseeable us getting a wage."

The main point seemed to be that people wanted help as soon as possible. Interestingly one client talked about how hard it is to ask for help and that they will only do this (at least the first time) when they are really desperate or at the point where they recognise that help is really crucial. It seems ironic then that agencies tend to still build in their own assessment processes. This would seem to call for either encouraging people to come forward earlier or to take greater account of people's own assessments of their situation.

"If you're homeless, yeah, you're homeless. You need something there and then, do you know what I mean. But then you have to wait around and phone up and have meetings and stuff like that. Now how is that? Some people have family and friends who they can stay at, do you know what I mean? But if you're homeless yeah you expect to have something rapid. You expect to just go there and they say there is a room here for you da di da. But no, you have to wait like a week or two weeks. If you're on heroin, you can get on scripts really quickly if you are homeless, that's really useful. There is a fast track to get registered."

"There is a cushion in a place. You have to go through 2 or 3 people before you can get to those people. You can't directly call those people, they say we'll ring them, and you say give me the number and I will do it, but no they are not allowed to do that. So I do not know who is dealing with me and if I go for more help somewhere else I do not know who to say."

People found it difficult that some projects demanded a level of stability that did not reflect the situations in which people ask for help.

"The project I'm with in XXXXX.. you have to be stable and have a track record and have a record of stability to get access."

"I'm on, stability is a pre-condition of staying there. (initially) I went into a B&B instead and was completely skint for 3 months. Thus proving that I didn't live a certain chaotic lifestyle, and that I wasn't going to fuck up or smash the place up. Which enabled me to gain access to the project I'm in now."

On a wider level, having lived in a hostel was a barrier to other kinds of services, sometimes even to other resources within that service, as this young woman expresses.

"I think it's a trap, and then they build you, train you, give you everything you need and then you get told because you lived in a hostel you can't get a job."

In terms of point of access, people seemed to not know about services, they found out through word of mouth or through the agency that seemed obvious to them. In most cases this was the council, in the cases of domestic violence it was the police. It seems that these agencies are crucial and yet, despite things like the homeless strategies and the expansion of the housing advice role of the local authorities, the council at least was not perceived as particularly useful.

"I had no idea about hostels or foyers or anything else. I was quite blind to it."

"It's not advertised as a home. We know about it cos we're in it."

"That's it man. I first became homeless when I was 15 like do you know what I mean. I was sleeping rough for 2 weeks I didn't know hostels existed, man. And then I went down the council one day and they referred me to some shit of a hostel."

"When I found myself homeless, I got in touch with the council. Hey provided bed and breakfast. I didn't get the help I was needing. They didn't put me in priority. I think when they don't put people in priority they forget about them. They said I was independent so I was not priority. Because I was out of custody, I asked them, where do I go? I don't know anybody here. They told me, the housing list, they just gave me a list and told me to go away."

Delivering outcomes

Focus group participants were asked to consider how services should be judged on whether they were any good or not.

Types of outcomes

Participants felt that agencies should be judged on how well clients had progressed whilst using services. This included whether they were re-housed but also a number of other outcomes. These included whether they had been able to address substance misuse issues and whether they had been able to access benefits. In addition people wanted some of the things they saw as helping them in section one to be quantified such as how many people get involved in user involvement initiatives, how many get jobs in the sector and, more generally, how many feel more independent.

"They are saying that it shouldn't be housing that's the only factor that's looked at. There are issues before housing such as benefits and medical and legal and what have you, that come before housing that need to be looked at."

"They should look at how many people they got jobs at XXXXXX and how many people feel independent. Statistical analysis of the people that leave in a range of areas."

"Well, is there no way of quantifying client input, the number of clients moving through that project, and where they go afterwards. Have they stabilised their lives if they had an unstable life? Were their housing and social needs addressed during that project, and where have they gone from there?"

Assessment of agencies

Most participants felt it was important that commissioners of services spoke directly to clients themselves to get a true picture of how services were operating. Random testing was also favoured as there was the belief that otherwise agencies could choose how their service was portrayed. There was a distinct distrust in what some called the middleman; they did not always trust the agencies to be honest brokers.

"Because if you tell them they'll just select a client that'll tell them what they want to hear..... There is no point asking the management how good is your service? Because he is going to blow his own trumpet."

Yeah. Don't ask the middleman. Ask the person on the street what they think is wrong. Obviously if you're asking the providers to hand out questionnaires, they're going to hand them out to someone they've really helped and moved on. So you're not gonna hear about the other cases."

For this reason the idea of 'mystery shoppers' was popular. They felt that people should be assessed randomly and even in secret, to get a true picture of what was actually going on in the agency.

"Yeah you've heard of mystery shoppers in supermarkets, why not do it with homeless people? You turn up in a city, say 'I'm new here, what should I do' and send someone along to the project and see what help is generally forthcoming."

"Do you know like nursery and they have that Ofsted that comes out and everything. They should do it like when they don't tell em. They should go there as a young person. Should just go there as a normal young person."

Some even saw this way of doing things as a matter of equity, it was a way of redressing the way that they are sometimes treated, what they are subject to.

"The idea about not telling them when they are just cruising through because that is what they do to us in terms of like when you are at the project and you get a letter for a room check and they are bang bang on the door and then they come in with the key and whatnot. What I'm saying is that is what an inspection should be like. You give them a letter. They give us a letter and say we are going to come in on so-and-so day but they still come in on other days as well."

There was also the suggestion that clients could be trained to carry out assessments, with a rationale for why it would be more effective.

"I think the way to do it is to use clients for everything, to get feedback. Train the clients to do the consultations themselves and use clients to go to other hostels to find out what the score is in that hostel."

"I think clients are more likely to be open with other clients than someone they see as an authority figure."

Chapter Five: Information gathering

Focus group participants were asked how they felt about all the questions agencies ask and how they ask them. They were also asked to consider what information they felt agencies needed to help them as clients.

Providing and sharing of information

Participants felt very frustrated about having to provide the same information again and again.

"I think there is a lack of communication between all services. If I speak to one person I find that they will say well go and see them and I find I should take a tape recorder with me and play what I said to the last person I met, you are going to ask me the same questions again and again."

"It is tiring to explain again and again, and sometimes the translator does not explain properly. The language barrier is different. They should just share the information."

Many felt that there should be some system for passing information between agencies.

"If they actually talked to each other the time they'd saved would be weeks. Where is the common sense in that?"

However there was some debate about exactly what information should be shared. Generally it was felt factual information should be shared but not workers opinions. There was a strong concern that clients risked being labelled negatively and this label would then follow them around. These limits should be placed until the worker has had a chance to meet the individual, otherwise they will be pre-judged. Others felt that the information should be generalised rather than being about specific cases.

"If you have a personality clash with your support worker, they can fire off reports about you to other organisations, that may be the next step along, and you could be precluded from getting in there because you've got so-and-so from project x saying you're disruptive or violent or whatever. I know people that have been put back onto the street because of basically lies and suppositions made by support workers."

"They should just discuss structures, not individual cases. Like, making sure there's a project for alcoholics, one for people just out of jail, one for stable people. Focus on client groups more than individuals."

"Your date of birth and your national insurance number and your bank details, that is all they need to know about you if they are not gonna meet you in person. If they don't have the time to meet you in person they don't need to know nothing else about you."

These concerns also spread to how information was shared internally, with repercussions for confidentiality.

"Everyone in the office knows my business cos I'm a yoyo. Everyone's got to liaise me, you get me but at the end of the day confidentiality to what degree, you know what I mean, to what degree? Now this is resettlement, they know a bit of me, probation/prevention?? know a bit of me to what degree. Now are they allowed to liaise with the whole project on what happened do you get what I mean cos what does the confidentiality cover?"

This seems to call into questions group confidentiality within an agency. This is where what a client shares with a worker is not confidential to that worker alone but could be shared with the staff team. Reasons for this sharing vary, the most common being to provide continuity of service to the young person in the event of worker being unavailable, ill, or changing role. (CSUN: 2003). While understandable, the above quote illustrates how this approach does not give the client any choice in the matter of when and how they share information with people. A client might share some things with a particular worker, having built up trust and they may not want another worker to know about those issues until a time of their choosing. The quote indicates that some clients would not want to engage with a worker if they felt that worker already knew something that they would want to share with them in their own time, if at all. Some agencies (Seal: 2004), in the light of this dynamic, took a more subtle approach, negotiating with a client what information could go on a common file and what would remain with worker if they left.

Negative assessments

Participants were also concerned that they were only ever asked negative things about themselves, rather than looking at any strengths that could be built on. This undermined confidence.

Brandon (1998) rightly identifies that many assessment models in this country are deficit models, identifying what people cannot do rather than what they can. They see people in terms of the problems they have rather than their attributes. He proposes that we need to use a model that examines needs in a wider context, one that acknowledges that everyone has needs, and that at times we may need some help with them.

"They're quite happy to find out if you're alcoholic or a criminal, and focus on your worst qualities, but they never focus on your best ones."

"Yeah. I'm not too proud of what I've done, I've been in prison and on drugs, and so you feel pretty low anyway when you've been on the streets. Going through it all again doesn't help."

Chapter Six: IT Solutions

Focus group participants were asked to consider other ways they could access the information they needed, other than through agencies, for example via the internet.

SP Directory

No participants were aware of the SP Directory.

"We don't know about it to be able to look at it."

Accessibility

In all of the focus groups except for the one held in a young people's project, it was felt there was not enough access to the internet to make it a viable way of finding out about available services. There were also issues around skills and exclusion.

"How you gonna get access to the internet though?"

"You don't even have a telephone never mind a PC."

"And a lot of people don't have an education, so they're not web literate and you've instantly excluded one of the most vulnerable groups."

Peers

Most participants said they found out about services from peers through the grapevine.

"Through peers, that's how you learn about things."

One participant suggested that if residents were trained as advocates they could go into agencies and give people information."

"We tried user involvement in hostels - if you actually had a person, like some of them here, and trained them up to be advocates actually in the hostel giving that information out. People are more likely to come to him or her than go to management, I think because its like the grapevine and they'll know that the person knows what they are talking about."

Conclusion

The Supporting People programme has been successful in bringing new focus to the provision of housing support to vulnerable people. During the course of this research we have seen many examples of good practice. For homeless people, the best projects give a level of support, which enables them to move towards independence. However for many their experience of accessing and using services can still be a frustrating and difficult one.

Homeless agencies often deliver services, which are unresponsive to the individual needs of clients. This can undermine existing relationships which are vital to the clients well being.

Smaller agencies or big agencies with small units are seen by clients as delivering better outcomes. However the biggest single factor in clients feeling they have received an effective service was their relationship with agency workers. Continuity of care and an understanding of clients experience were of great importance.

Agencies do not work together effectively to provide clients with the highest standards of care. Requiring agencies to compete for funding can undermine effective co-ordination.

In reality clients have very little choice over the services they are able to access this is particularly acute in rural areas where there is often only one service. Once they have accessed services the picture of involvement is mixed. Some agencies have developed effective ways to ensure clients are involved in how services are developed and delivered. However many agencies have failed to develop effective systems and clients feel they have little or no control in the way services are delivered. Homeless people want to see agencies held accountable for

hard outcomes relating to re-housing benefits and health matters. They also wish to see soft outcomes such as how safe people feel being measured. Commissioners of services need to talk directly to clients in order to find out the realities of how effective services were. Clients could also be involved in doing assessments.

Clients find providing the same information to different agencies very frustrating, there is also a sense that agencies are only interested in negative information rather than looking at strengths that can be built upon.

It is difficult for homeless people to access the information they require on services. Lack of access to the Internet means that this was not seen as a practical way of finding information. Many homeless people rely on their peers for information about services.

Most homeless people do not see local authorities as a gateway to all services but rather as a gatekeeper. Despite emphasis put on this in Homelessness Strategies this role is not seen as effective. Clients would rather see this information role undertaken by the voluntary and community sector

The recommendations that follow have implications at three levels. For the ODPM in developing a new strategy, for Local Authorities in commissioning services and for homelessness agencies in how they deliver services.

Recommendations

ODPM

1. Clients should have much more say in how places are run. The transitory nature of client's use of homelessness agencies should not be seen as an excuse. The QAF requirements on service user involvement should form part of the core rather than supplementary requirements. Where clients are asked to undertake substantial work they should be adequately remunerated.
2. Agencies should not have arbitrary time limits for allowing ex-service users to volunteer or become employed. Agencies should be required to set targets for levels of ex-service users employed and demonstrate how it will be achieved.
3. There should be a review of the QAF standards relating to assessment, the starting point should be skills and abilities, the current assessment is often a deficit model.
4. Homeless people should have a passport of information, this should contain factual information. However, any opinions or matters of conjecture should be negotiated with the client.
5. The role of local authorities in giving advice to homeless people should be monitored, preferably by homeless people, and strengthened within homelessness strategies.
5. Ways should be explored to enable agencies to work together effectively. One way of doing this might be for local authorities to issue only one contract to a number of agencies that have to demonstrate how they will work together.
6. Investment should be made in peer education schemes as an alternative method of disseminating knowledge.
7. Agencies should be judged on hard outcomes, such as how many people are re-housed. Also soft outcomes, for example whether clients feel safe, what is the quality of relationships with staff, do they feel involved with services.
8. In conducting supporting people reviews, direct contact with clients of services should be the norm.
9. Commissioners should employ a mystery shopper model; clients could be trained to access agencies to assess services.

Commissioners

1. Smaller projects or units were seen as more effective. Supporting People officers should have a capacity building role to enable smaller agencies to be able to access funds. There should be commitment to re-distribution of funds.
2. Agencies should be judged on number of locums they use, high levels should be seen as an agency failure. Levels of staff retention should also be monitored.
3. Second stage support is crucial to enabling clients to achieve independence. Low-level support within agencies and floating support to maintain tenancies should be prioritised.
4. Preventative work is very important. Innovative schemes such as homeless people visiting schools to discuss their experiences should be supported.
5. Agencies should see relationships clients have as something to be valued rather than a potential problem and structures should reflect this. There should be more provision for couples and for friends and family to see and stay with clients.
2. Privacy should be respected and treated as paramount. Random room checks should be the exception rather than the rule and only if there is a particular reason.
3. Staff should be recruited on basis of levels of commitment and ability to relate to the client group. It should be seen as a positive rather than negative thing to share their own relevant experience.
4. Specific training should be delivered on the 'homeless experience', including what it is like to go through services, preferably involving ex-clients, or drawing on their experiences
5. Training programmes for front line workers on group work and effective interagency working should be encouraged
6. Agencies should review their confidentiality policies, particularly where there is group confidentiality. Clients should have more control about what information is shared between workers and at what point, unless there are specific risk factors.

Methodology

Why focus groups?

Such public confessional events also tend to favour the confident and dominant within any vulnerable group (Beresford and Croft: 1993) both in terms of who turns up and who speaks. Focus groups were seen as appropriate as they were small, were held in venues where participants were familiar with the environment and each other, and were targeted towards specific groups. There are also methodological reasons for using focus groups, given the

1. focus of the brief. Stewart and Shamdasani feel that focus
2. groups are useful for:
 3. Stimulating new ideas and creative concepts;
 - Diagnosing the potential for problems with a new programme, service or product;
 - Generating impressions of products, programmes, services, institutions, or other objects of interest;All of which seem pertinent to this research. Patton (1990) takes this further feeling focus groups interviews are essential in the evaluation process: as part of a needs assessment, during a programme, at the end of the programme, or months after the completion of a programme to gather perceptions on the outcome of that programme.

Recruitment and structure of the groups

Stewart and Shamdasani suggest that convenience sampling should be employed with focus groups, that is, the group must consist of representative members of the larger population (1990, p.53). To these ends we chose the venues and target groups to map across the diversity of the clients groups Supporting People fund.

	Birmingham	Bradford	London	Druham	Exeter
Number of participants	10	9	12	13	8
Rural				*	*
Urban	*	*	*		
Women		*			
BME	*	*			
Young People	*			*	
Rough Sleeping			*		*
Domestic Violence		*			
Day Centre	*				*
Floating Support	*				*
Second Stage Housing	*			*	
Mental Health			*		
Drug Users			*		
Hostels		*	*	*	

Stewart and Shamdasani say most focus groups consist of between 6-12 people. Merton et al. suggests that *"The size of the group should manifestly be governed by two considerations...it should not be so large as to be unwieldy or to preclude adequate participation by most members nor should it be so small that it fails to provide substantially greater coverage than that of an interview with one individual"* (1990, p.137). With this in mind, we aimed for 10 participants by requesting up to 12 for each group. We asked agencies to identify participants, including bringing in users from other projects. A danger with working through agencies can be that they cherry pick the clients, or even that having it in an agencies premise can make them feel beholden to them.

right to take out any incriminating statements in the drafting stage of the report. To bolster this, at the start of the focus groups, after introductions both workers from the agencies and representative s if the ODPM were asked to leave, to free up people's responses.

Participants were also paid £10 for their participation, given to them at the end of the session. This was a token payment to respect people for giving up their time.

Positively several factors ameliorated against this. Firstly we picked agencies where we had confidence that they would be 'honest brokers', and not 'select out' difficult clients. Secondly, we designed the question so as to broadened out from people's experiences of that particular agency to their experiences of services generally, something we were at pains to point out to both agencies and participants. Finally we assured confidentiality to clients with them having the

appendix one: methodology - questions

When formulating questions for the interview guide, Stewart and Shamdasani suggest two principles must be considered:

That questions be ordered from the more general to the

1. Questions of greater importance should be placed early,
2. near the top of the guide, while those of less importance go towards the end.

Given this we designed the following questions to map across the concerns of the OPDM, as illustrated in the following table.

Think about your journey through homelessness, what

1. services were useful and not useful at different points?
What problems have you had accessing or getting to services?

2. How do you feel about all the questions agencies ask and how they ask them. What information do they need to be able to help you?
3. How should services be judged on whether they are any good or not?
4. Do you feel you have enough say in the services you have used? How would you like to be involved? What would help to make this happen?
5. Do different services you use work together effectively? What other ways could you get the information you need that isn't about talking to agencies eg internet, and what problems may arise with them?
- 6.
- 7.

Supporting People Interest	Question(s)
We want services provided which help you to be able to live independently What help did you need to be able to do this? When you became homeless? When you were moving back to having your own place? Did you get these services? Which did you not get?	1 1 1 1 1
We want services to be designed and delivered in a joined up way Did you get services from one person / organisation? If not, how many different people did you need to deal with? Were the arrangements for different services helpful? Why / why not?	1 & 6 1 & 6 1 & 6 1 & 6
We want people who use services to have choice and control over services Were you given any choice over what services you received? Were you given any choice or control over when and how the services were delivered to you?	1 & 5 1 & 5
We want authorities to plan and manage services in a way which provides for people who move around between authorities Did you have problems getting access to services in the place where you asked for them? If so, what problems?	1 & 2 1 & 2
We want services which are based on delivering outcomes for people What sort of outcomes do you want from the services you received? Do you feel that the service was trying to deliver outcomes for you? Do you feel that the provider involved you in deciding on how you were progressing towards outcomes?	1 & 4 1 & 4 1 & 4
We want authorities and providers to be smarter about the information they ask for Were you asked for the same information by different people / organisations? If so, what? Were you asked for the same information more than once by the same person / organisation? Was it explained to you why this information was being asked for? Were you asked for information where you could not understand why they wanted or needed it? Were you asked for information that you did not think they should need to know?	3 3 3 3 3
We want authorities and providers to think about how they can use electronic / IT solutions There is already a Directory of Supporting People services on the internet. It is intended to allow people who need services to see what is available and where, and then to choose which services to go to. Is this sort of resource of any use to you? Why / why not? What (other) sort of electronic resource might be of help? Something on the internet? Something which makes use of mobile phones?	7 7

Transcriptions

We based our analytic procedures on the ideas of Hycner (1985). Therefore in transcribing we were keen to capture any silences, indicated by dots, and noted any change in pace or tone. We were at pains to capture any emphases that were placed on particular words by the interviewee. Beyond this we did not punctuate the transcriptions beyond any distinguishable full stops that the interviewee indicated. Hycner, being a phenomenologist, talks about the importance of 'bracketing' or 'suspending' our views, in order to 'enter into the unique world of the person who has been interviewed.' (Hycner: 1985) To these ends we also wrote an account immediately after every interview where we catalogued our feelings about the interview, any strong emotions that came across in the interview from the interviewee, any thing that we viewed might be missed in a purely audio account including non-verbal communication (Mishler: 1986) and anything that they talked about afterwards or before. This was bearing in mind any ethical considerations; we told interviewees we kept such a journal, and its nature, but that they would not be directly quoted in it.

"I feel like a statistic for the Home Office, not a human being. It's degrading and impersonal."

Analysis

Developing the research themes was mainly achieved through an examination of the transcripts, supplemented by the commentaries mentioned above. Coding was based on the principles of grounded theory as expounded by Strauss and Corbin (1998). In coding the scripts we were keen to keep the generalised units as far as possible to be a crystallisation and condensation of what was said, using as much as possible the literal words of the participant. However, sticking closer to Hycner than Strauss and Corbin, we did refine and eliminate units according to their relevance to the research question, and the interests of the ODPM, rather than staying totally grounded in the data. Coding was done using NUD*ST qualitative software.

We then clustered the generalised units into domain or cluster codes, where they seemed to naturally come together. In attempting this we followed Spradley's (1979) suggested steps for the creation of domains. Firstly we examined those units that seemed to come together 'naturally' and then examined some of the raw statements within these units to see if there was an overarching term they had in common or, following Hycner, a common linkage that could be named and was relevant to the research question.





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