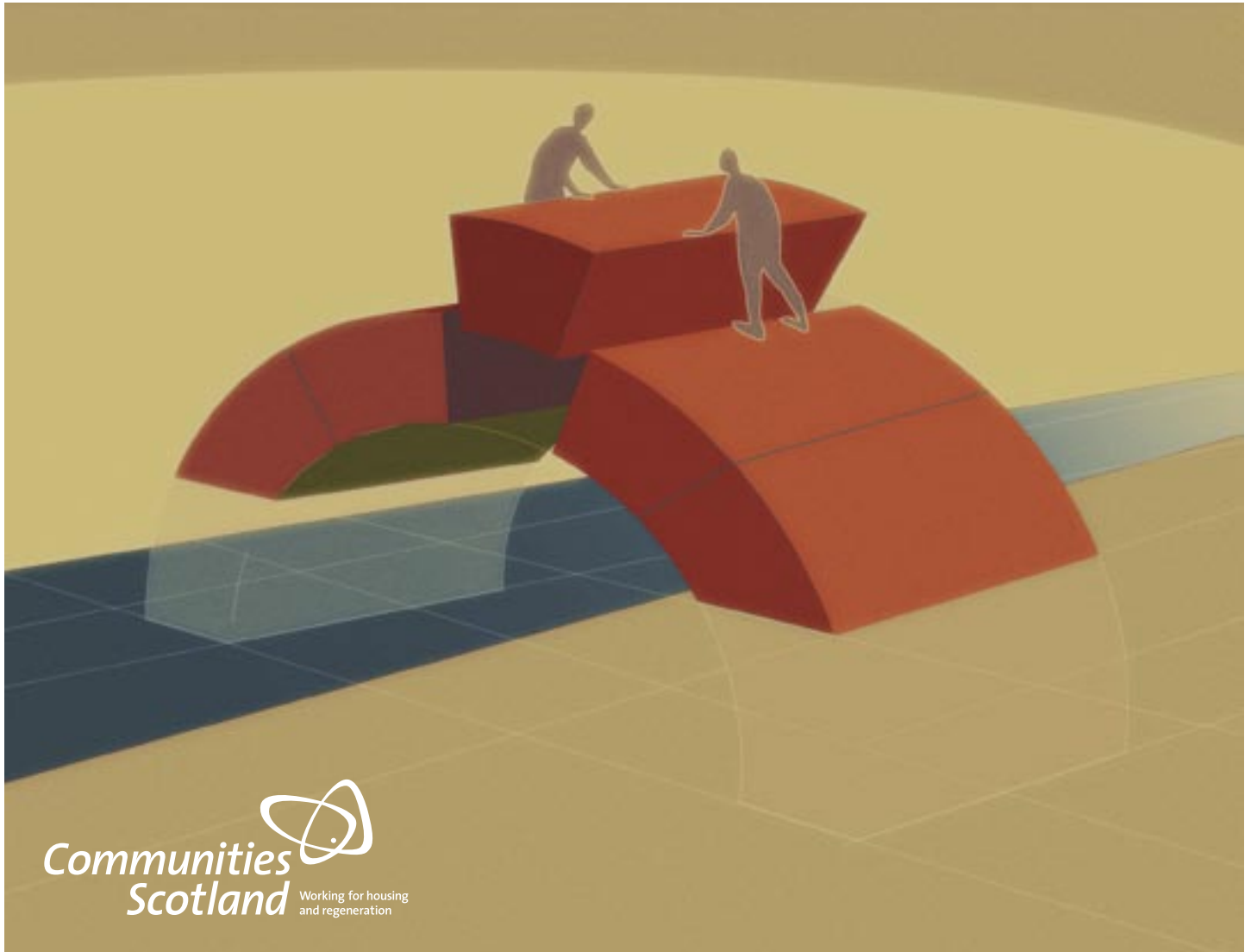




BUILDING BRIDGES ISSUE 54 MAY 2007

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HomePoint News



**Communities
Scotland** 
Working for housing
and regeneration

BUILDING BRIDGES

Editorial by Eleanor Clark

At HomePoint we have always been concerned with good practice. Increasingly we realise good practice and effective delivery of advice is not just a matter of providing the right information at the right time. Much of the impact of information is in how it's delivered and whether it links up and is supported in ways a service user can apply to real life.

Homelessness has been a key concern in Scotland, and in this newsletter we look at two projects that deal with advice to help prevent homelessness. The Glasgow Simon Community's Resettlement Training Service has led the way in working with people who have experienced homelessness as peer educators, who then educate and help others in the same situation. Their peer educators have now taken their skills to the stage, using powerful techniques of 'forum theatre' to bring the message home to audiences by using 'information through participation'. They also use workshops, training and discussion sessions to get across the message that being homeless can happen to anyone – and it can be a powerful beginning for new life choices.

Building bridges to service users and to other advice organisations is crucial to good advice. You will also read here about how the second-tier support agency SHAS builds the capacity of advisers in the advice agencies it works with, and how it is now extending training and access to resources to a range of new organisations.

Advice is only as good as its results. Advice must be relevant, sympathetic, realistic, fully understood and supported. No advice provider stands alone. Enjoy these stories of good practice in building bridges not only to service users but to other advice agencies. These bridges change lives.

RESETTLEMENT TRAINING SERVICE

You've heard about the RTS (Resettlement Training Service) in Oslo – and now they're back! The RTS is riding high after a successful audit, and full of even more exciting plans for helping service users, training providers, and sharing the good practice they've evolved with their partners in Norway.

'Peer education is the root of all of our activities.' Margaret Anne Gachagan is confident in her description of the Simon Community's Resettlement Training Service (RTS) in Glasgow, a service that supports people to put their lives together in new ways after experiencing homelessness. 'Our remit is to provide information and advice in a way that enables people to feel more in control, and be better equipped to make informed choices, while navigating the process of their own resettlement,' says Margaret Anne. 'We give housing information and advice through group work, training courses, outreach and shared learning. But peer educators are the key.'

RTS works with peer educators in every area of its service: information giving, workshops, courses, meetings, training, and open events. Peer educator volunteers sit on the organisation's Board and participate in decision-making. They also write articles for and help distribute the RTS Volunteer News.

We look in the following articles at how four strands of the RTS service work together to provide information, support, staff training and new options for people experiencing homelessness.





PERFORMANCE ART: 'HE'S NEVER ON THE HOME STRAIGHT'

If a picture is worth ten thousand words, as Confucius said, then is a theatre performance worth ten thousand advice leaflets? Ask the new RTS theatrical group Information Through Participation (ITP).

FORUM THEATRE

Not content merely to talk about homelessness, RTS supported its volunteers in forming a drama group. The idea came from Cardboard Citizens, a theatre group from London, the only theatre company in the UK comprised only of people who have experienced homelessness. Cardboard Citizens worked in partnership with the Glasgow Simon Community and RTS volunteers to script and perform their own five scene play, 'He's Never on the Home Straight.'

The play is about gambling, a couple being evicted, and homelessness. And it hit hard – because it evolved from the experience of the performers themselves. It uses 'forum theatre,' a very special kind of performance art. To construct the play, the actors and other participants first sit and talk through the issue they want to present (gambling and losing your home). Then they develop scenarios and the cast act them out. What would Frank say to Lorraine? What would happen then? What are the immediate problems? What are the hidden problems? How do they affect the characters?

But the play takes on its real life once the audience arrives. Forum theatre stories always end in disaster. The gambler loses his tenancy and becomes homeless. But after the performance, the actors engage the audience. They re-run the show, asking the audience to stop it at the first point where things

start to go wrong. The audience are then asked what could happen to change the outcome. Each scenario is acted out by the actors, until, at the end, the gambler is offered a number of choices by the audience - so disaster can be averted.

'It's an organic process,' explains Margaret Anne. 'The solution evolves like the production itself. It's a great way of getting across information on homelessness to people who haven't experienced it. It evokes a passionate response from the audience.'

'THE PLAY WAS BRILLIANT'

The partnership with Cardboard Citizens led to an unexpected result. The ITP group were invited to participate in a three-day drama workshop at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama! 'Boy! Were we all nervous!' commented Jean, one of the peer educator actors. 'What we did in the three day workshop was talk about forum theatre – who invented it, and then made up scenarios for the audience to watch. The students thought the play was brilliant. Adrian, Artistic Director with Cardboard Citizens, said it was a treat to watch.'

Margaret Anne added, 'Everyone can see the benefits of being involved in this. It created a new link for us with the Academy of Music and Drama. And the ITP group are currently developing ways to forum their work and are planning a tour.'

PEER EDUCATION AND GOOD PRACTICE

'Peer educators shape the future.' This is a strong statement: but coming from Kevin, a volunteer peer educator at the RTS, it seems quite believable.

'SHARE WHAT WE LEARN'

Peer educators participate in every area of the service, from delivering workshops in other organisations and speaking at information and training courses to contributing to consultations on the Glasgow Homelessness Strategy. Peer educators are involved in updating resources and sending out leaflets, creating the induction process for new volunteers, and discussing policy and procedures. Peer educators also formed a central part of the audit process (see 'A WORD ON THE AUDIT' on page 9), when the RTS gained formal accreditation against the National Standards.

'We share what we've learned at meetings,' says Kevin. 'But so much positive stuff happens in here we could easily be talking for a week.' The peer educators are volunteers who have experienced homelessness. They attend courses and go on to do training on how to design and deliver sessions on courses such as 'Coping on Your Own' or



'I've Got a House – What Are My Rights?'

Then they help other service users discover their options. How do you put your life back together after the experience of homelessness? How do you overcome feelings of isolation? Where do you get the confidence to start over? What support is available? The peer educators know, because they've been there and come out the other side.

They visit hostels and projects and promote the RTS courses, as well as giving practical information to service providers. Who could talk with more confidence on what works in homelessness advice than someone who has been through it?

RESPECT AND UNDERSTANDING

Peer educators also deliver staff training. They focus on their experience of what works and what doesn't work in giving and getting advice. Good working practice gets a sharp nudge from peer educators, many of whose lives have changed as a result of the quality of advice they received. 'Treat people with respect, treat them as human beings,' commented one peer educator, talking about his experience with advisers. 'It's much easier to cope with systems if things are explained in a way that's understandable. Then make sure the advice has been fully understood.'

'We've achieved a lot in the last year,' Bill tells HomePoint, in a room full of bright posters on workshops, drama and local events. Bill is another peer educator. 'But we've got even more ideas



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for this year! I hope that we are going to be as successful this year as we were last year.' The view looks promising. The project has forged a new partnership with Ayrshire through the Simon Community, and they have created another new partnership with GEMAP, the Greater Easterhouse Money Advice Project, to develop workshops and a toolkit on debt management and prevention of homelessness. The team is working tirelessly on increasing their links with the Oslo homelessness project SAFIR (see 'Oslo update' on page 8). One IT-gifted volunteer, Wallace, is even developing a new super-database for signposting information across Glasgow... so watch this space!

'RTS gives us a whole world of opportunities,' says Bill. 'Showing people how to be empowered means you get empowered too. When you look to the past you also look to the future.'

OPEN EVENTS AND WORKSHOPS

One way to get the RTS message across to the public is to invite agencies and advice organisations to meet RTS service users and staff. Drop-in open events run by the service bring new faces into their space – not just people experiencing homelessness but staff from other organisations come too.

Open events offer visits to the RTS training space, a chance to talk to peer educators and staff, and an experience of what service users can expect when they use the RTS service. As usual, peer educators are central to getting these events going. Before the

event, they will suggest guests they'd like to invite, help with the mail-out and posters, and be at the door to 'meet and greet' guests. When Bill did his first meet and greet session, he told me, 'It made me feel like I didn't know anybody. It was scary. I wondered what it would be like, all these new people. But everyone was really friendly. It was fine.'

As guests arrive, they sit round tables and chat. Staff and peer educators explain what they do in the service, hand out information leaflets, and give presentations. They also take the word out to hostels and other organisations. James, a peer educator, reported on a visit to Lodging House mission in an article for the RTS Volunteer News. 'People were a bit apprehensive about coming up to the stall to begin with,' he wrote, 'but started to come up slowly and quite a few people were interested by what we had to offer and were glad to chat about their requirements. We were also successful booking people on to a number of courses and quite a number of leaflets were taken away by people to read.'

Moving on to Hope House, they talked to 12 people 'who were very interested in the courses and the leaflets which were on offer. They were also glad to have a wee chat in general.' The team do weekly Housing Information and Advice outreach workshops which make information more accessible to people in hostels. 'Lots of the time people just don't know who to talk to or what to ask,' commented Etta, 'and that is where RTS can signpost people to appropriate services.'

OUTREACH: OSLO UPDATE

'We're still working together – and it's better than ever!' enthuses Margaret Anne as we reminisce about last year's exciting events.



Five RTS volunteer peer educators and three staff flew to Oslo (see HomePoint News 51 'Watch out Oslo! Here we come!') after meeting members of a Norwegian homelessness advice service seeking examples of good practice in Glasgow. The visit changed lives – and since then the joint project has gone from strength to strength.

FOREIGN EXCHANGE

The two groups have exchanged information ever since getting together a year ago. SAFIR, the Oslo group, have taken two of the RTS courses, 'Coping on Your Own' and 'Money to Spend', and adapted them for use in Norway. They are working with RTS on staff training and developing further courses. Last September RTS hosted the Oslo group in Glasgow, when the Oslo team brought their own peer educators over to observe how RTS operates.

Stine, of the SAFIR team, stated that RTS had provided them with 'unforgettable memories' of friendship, not to mention a

ride in a Clydesdale horse-drawn carriage around Queens Park, a visit to Kelvingrove art galleries and a visit to the barras for a local fish supper. 'It's difficult to put into words the benefits this working partnership is bringing to the people involved, and to our organisations,' says Margaret Anne. 'SAFIR is taking the idea of the Scottish National Standards for Information and Advice Services to their government. People are sharing what works.'

SAFIR was impressed – and even happier when it later received an award from the Norwegian government for good practice in homelessness advice! This year the Board of SAFIR has decided to visit the RTS service and experience it for themselves.

PULLING TOGETHER

The Oslo visit owed its success to the meticulous planning that goes into each RTS event. Before going, staff explained to peer educators every stage of arriving at an airport to make a flight. 'To involve people in service delivery you need to prepare

thoroughly,' said Margaret Anne. 'We went through how bags are weighed, what you can carry with you, exactly what questions staff would ask at check-in, as well as what it's like to fly.' Obviously the briefing worked, though some of the group had never set foot in an aircraft before. Every member of the group is keen to return, and say they will jump on an Oslo flight at the first chance.

Three peer educators decidedly agreed. 'We pulled together,' commented Kevin. 'There was no stress, everyone got on so well.' 'Listening to others' stories of their struggles was very powerful,' agreed Jean. Jim added, 'Two countries working together is making a difference!'

AND A WORD ON THE AUDIT

Yes, RTS successfully achieved accreditation against the HomePoint Scottish National Standards for Information and Advice Services.

But it wasn't easy. This is not a service that fits recognised categories and the auditors had to be specially briefed on the role of peer educators in the service, matters of confidentiality, and other things. But with cooperation and the spirit of helpfulness so typical of everything the RTS does, they came through – and they're delighted.

'I'm really glad we've been audited,' John, a peer educator,

exclaimed with feeling. 'This is a brilliant service. It does good work. We need that to be recognised, because so many services aren't so brilliant.'

'The audit allowed us to reflect usefully on our policy and practice,' Margaret Anne concludes. 'At times it felt difficult, but it was really rewarding. We're delighted we've achieved accreditation.'



SCOTTISH HOUSING ADVISORY SERVICE

Attention, advice providers! If you are one of the 190 authorities and agencies now signed up to the new and expanded SHAS advisory service, you will already be building the capacity of your advisers. Here is the service you can expect. And it's free of charge.

HISTORY OF THE SERVICE

The Scottish Housing Advisory Service (SHAS) began its partnership with Citizens Advice Scotland by providing CAB workers with support and training in areas of housing law to help prevent homelessness. SHAS supported delivery of quality housing information and advice across Scotland as CABx implemented HomePoint's Scottish National Standards for Housing Information and Advice Services. The national network built up a large bank of expertise. CABx developed relationships of trust with the SHAS service, and advisers knew they had expert back-up when advising clients on housing law.

With its many years of experience in supporting and training frontline advisers in providing housing advice, SHAS has now moved into new territory.

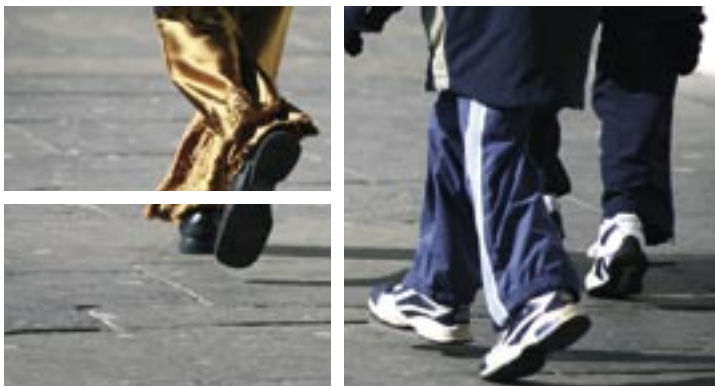
Moving beyond preventing homelessness, the expanded service aims to improve the capacity of housing advisers to give quality advice. SHAS support to advisers complements HomePoint's broader organisational development support to advice services.

EXTENDING SECOND TIER SUPPORT

The new service offers a combination of consultancy and referral, training for advisers in housing law, and access to information resources. Advice, training and information will now be offered not just to CABx advisers, but to other providers of housing advice. Last August SHAS rolled out its new service, inviting hundreds of agencies to participate. Almost immediately it began to deal with a range of local authorities, CABx, RSLs and voluntary sector agencies.

To be eligible to use the service a housing advice agency must be part of the local authority's housing advice and information network, registered in the HomePoint Directory of Information and Advice Providers, and be working towards meeting the National Standards. The new SHAS will also offer local authorities an overview of how local advice providers are dealing with housing advice, in order to encourage the sharing of good practice in delivering services.





'We started by simply providing an advice service, but now we're moving into trying to meet specific agency needs.'

HOW SHAS DELIVERS THE GOODS

'Advisers registered with us now have several choices,' Mark Upward, SHAS Housing Aid Manager, told HomePoint. 'On weekdays they can access our telephone advice line and discuss a specific question. They can also request training in housing advice and they can use our web-based information resources, updated regularly on the Shelter site. Linking up the three elements means they get a range of services.'

'What we hope for is to see advisers get better and better at what they do,' explained Mark. 'Capacity building is about building a community of expertise and knowledge, and creating ways for organisations to share it. Whilst the SHAS advice line is staffed by housing advice specialists, we aim to support problem solvers in other agencies to get better at what they do and become experts themselves. We want to train the problem solvers and support them in sharing what they do well.'

ASKING AND IMPROVING

SHAS plans to monitor the advice line to identify where advisers need more training or focus on particular issues. Registered agencies have been asked to complete a self-assessment checklist on adviser competencies in various areas of advice so that SHAS can target its resources to agencies and areas where they are most needed. Local authorities are being informed of services in their areas currently supported by SHAS, building up

local referral networks and supporting authorities in creating a strong housing advice service.

Online information resources to support advisers are available through the SHAS page of Shelter's website. They include case studies on eviction, homelessness, relationship breakdown, repossession, and social and private rented sector issues. 'We started by simply providing an advice service,' said Mark, 'but now we're moving into trying to meet specific agency needs. We ask agencies to suggest feedback questions so they will engage with the exercise.'

Gathering data through its website and through the agencies it works with will help SHAS to map the kinds of people using services, information available to them, and any service gaps that may exist.

'Capacity building is often about disseminating information, not training,' Mark concluded. 'We now offer both.'

USE IT TODAY

If you are signed up, or think you should be signed up, to the SHAS service, find out what it can offer you.

Visit SHAS on <http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/policy/policy-6774.cfm>

OPEN DOOR FIFE ACCREDITATION SUCCESS

Congratulations to Open Door Fife which has been accredited after its audit under the National Standards. Carole Simpson at Open Door says, 'Being accredited against the Standards acknowledges the

quality of work carried out by our housing advice service. Our advisers are trained to a high level and provide advice, information, advocacy and representation for people who are homeless or have

housing difficulties. The service has always been of the highest quality, due to the commitment of our workers, and this accreditation acknowledges this on a national level.'

IT'S A CENTURY FROM EDINBURGH COUNCIL!

City of Edinburgh Council recently achieved a remarkable century. Val MacAndrew, based at the Council's South Edinburgh local office, was the 100th member of staff to pass through the HomePoint training for housing advisers, delivered by Shelter. The training covers the 19

areas of housing law as defined in the National Standards. Val worked on the course with colleagues Norma McDonald and Siobhan Delaney, who were the 99th and 101st trainees to complete the package.

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