Home is where the heart is

Homelessness and rebuilding relationships
Foreword

Since St Mungo’s inception nearly forty years ago, some issues have not changed. The breakdown of social support networks through estrangement from partners, parents, siblings, children and friends continues to be a major cause, and consequence, of homelessness.

The provision of family mediation services and relationship counselling to homeless people is comparatively new, and gives us an opportunity both to prevent homelessness and to empower homeless men and women in their recovery.

Homeless men and women often lack support networks for good reason. All too often lives are littered with tales of trauma and abuse that go back to early childhood. It is not surprising then, that the ability to form lasting and positive relationships is often affected; many homeless people have no positive role models to look to.

The St Mungo’s and Relate Relationship and Parenting Skills project recognises that it is crucial that we approach recovery from homelessness holistically. Recovering from drug or alcohol addiction, for example, can be made easier both by the incentive to rebuild and sustain relationships and by the support of a loving family.

In April 2005, St Mungo’s and Relate made a joint commitment to try to prevent our clients returning to the street by helping them rebuild their broken relationships and develop new networks of support. We also made a commitment to our staff to enable them to recognise and address their clients’ problems with relationships. Giving our frontline staff expertise in this area is a significant step forward, and an essential one as it goes some way to overcoming the reluctance of many homeless people to engage with traditional counselling services.

We have been delighted to benefit from Relate’s experience and we fully hope that this successful partnership will continue. We are also grateful to the Department for Children, Schools and Families for the Strengthening Families Grant which has made this project possible.

We have made an excellent start and hope to be able to provide the service for many years to come.

Charles Fraser CBE
Chief Executive
Introduction

The phrase ‘home is where the heart is’ is thought to be first used by Roman author Pliny the Elder in the first century AD.¹

It is not a new idea then, that the word ‘home’ carries implications far beyond the four walls and roof that make up a house. It can mean a haven, a sense of belonging, a central point to which one returns to feel at ease and unpressed by life’s trials. Roget’s Thesaurus adds the note “home is the place one lives, with pleasant connotations or family ties included”.²

To be ‘homeless’, therefore, is not only to be without settled accommodation, but to be without refuge, and, all too often, without the support network of family and real friends.

St Mungo’s first strategic objective is ‘to tackle the causes and consequences of homelessness’. Social isolation is a concrete consequence of homelessness. It is also one of the undisputed causes. In Crisis’ report ‘A Future Foretold’ (1999) the second most cited contributor to homelessness was long term relationship breakdown; second only to drug and alcohol abuse.³ Under the auspices of our first strategic objective, therefore, St Mungo’s has a duty to help our clients establish and maintain relationships with their parents, partners, siblings, children, wider family members and friends.

This report aims to highlight relationship breakdown as a major contributing factor to homelessness and evaluate the impact of St Mungo’s Relationship and Parenting Skills Project in light of the objectives set out above.

Homelessness and relationship breakdown - making the connection

Relationship breakdown remains one of the primary causes of homelessness. In 2007, St Mungo’s surveyed over a thousand residents as part of their annual needs survey.

We found that:

- 41% of St Mungo’s residents said that relationship breakdown impacted on their homelessness;
- 47% of residents surveyed said that they would like more regular contact with their family than they have at present;
- 43% of the men and women who are resident at St Mungo’s services do not give any next of kin details;⁴ and
- 18% of residents said they had not had any contact with family for over six months; however this figure is likely to be a lot higher as 35% of respondents refrained from answering the question.

¹ “Home is where the heart is.” Dictionary of Popular Proverbs and Sayings. Random House 2006
² “Home.” Roget’s New Millennium™ Thesaurus, First Edition (v 1.3.1). Lexico Publishing Group, LLC 2007
³ “A Future Foretold.” Lemos & Goodby. Crisis, 1999
⁴ This data supplied not by the survey but by information clients give when booking into St Mungo’s accommodation
St Mungo’s and Relate Relationship and Parenting Skills Project - A best practice model

The St Mungo’s and Relate Relationship and Parenting Skills project is a three-year scheme (April 2005 – March 2008) funded by the Department for Education and Skills (now the Department for Children, Schools and Families) through its Strengthening Families Grants Work Programme. In the first two years of operation it has counselled over 100 clients and trained over 150 staff.

The project’s three objectives are:

1. To enable people to build and maintain relationships as a couple
2. To enable people to build relationships with their children and gain skills to enable them to maintain the relationship
3. To ensure a skilled and confident staff team in working with parenting and relationship needs.

The project itself has been delivered in three ways:

• One to one counselling

Relate counsellors have provided one to one counselling sessions, available to all St Mungo’s clients. The counselling has been well-received. Clients seek to gain increased confidence, emotional support and improved skills in managing conflict.

• Client skills development workshops

Client training workshops in relationship skills have been developed and delivered by Relate, in the form of two day single gender participative workshops. Reasons given for attending the workshops include ‘family issues’ and ‘help with parenting’.

• St Mungo’s staff training

Relate staff have delivered training to St Mungo’s operational staff members in the forms of both one day ‘taster’ and more in-depth three day courses. The courses are designed to improve staff knowledge, confidence and skills around building and maintaining relationships to enable staff to better support their clients with these issues. The training has successfully fulfilled its objectives, with staff demonstrating a marked increase in their knowledge, confidence and skills around relationship issues. Staff commented:

“...I have become more aware of my reactions and it has helped me in conflict management.”

“I feel I will be able to help others develop the ability to see change in themselves.”

A report by Groundswell, the leading client involvement and self-help organisation working in the field of homelessness in the UK, found that:

“The overall benefits of this training are that it has empowered staff in both their professional and personal development. It has facilitated greater understanding and client evaluation, and a set of strategies and techniques to help support clients.”

Overall, the project has enabled clients to increase their sense of self-worth and begin to rebuild their broken relationships and develop new networks of support. One to one counselling has supported clients to begin to address some of the issues (e.g. domestic violence or relationship breakdown) that have led to their homelessness. Client skills development workshops have increased confidence in sharing personal information and helped clients to forge new friendships. St Mungo’s staff have developed their confidence, knowledge and skills in supporting clients to address relationship issues.

Angela’s story

Angela has 4 children; Ashley who is 18, Aisha 17, Aston 7 and Aneeka 6. Until May 2006 Angela was living with her children and partner in her own accommodation.

In May 2006 Angela’s problems with drink and drugs came to a crisis point and she was evicted from her home. She went to stay with a friend but when she could no longer stay there she had nowhere to go and found herself homeless.

She met a St Mungo’s worker and was found a bed at the St Mungo’s Pagnell Street Hostel.

She has regular contact with her daughter Aisha, and speaks to her most days, but after she was evicted from her home Angela’s problems with drink and drugs worsened and she missed the appointments she made to meet her two youngest children. Their relationship had broken down and after the missed appointments he refused to let Angela see her children.

Earlier this year, St Mungo’s recommended that Angela attend the St Mungo’s and Relate Relationship and Parenting Skills counselling sessions.

So far Angela says the sessions have been a real wake up call. They have helped her to focus on herself and see that her addiction to alcohol and drugs has been keeping her away from her children.

She realised that alcohol was killing her and that, when she was at home with her children, drinking would make her ‘freak out and black out’. Angela now understands what this was doing to her family and the counselling has helped her to control her drinking. She misses her children a great deal and has realised how much she wants to see them and rebuild her relationships with them.

Since the counselling she has seen Aston and Aneeka twice. The sessions have helped her improve her relationship with their father and she has been able to call him, speak to him and not pressure him and keep her appointment to see their children.

Angela now doesn’t call Aston and Aneeka’s father until she is focussed. She understands that she needs to be ready in herself, focussed on what she wants and sober when she talks to him and meets the children.

She says that talking to a stranger had a big impact on her. Speaking to someone who just listened, who didn’t put her down or criticise her but who paid attention to what she was saying and gave her positive feedback made a huge difference.

Angela said: “In the first session I just didn’t stop talking – I spoke so much – I didn’t realise I could say so much about myself!”

Angela says that the counselling has: “taught me that I need to take my time, not to rush either myself or my ex-partner. I need to look at myself first in order to be in a good state to see my kids – if I can’t be straight then I can’t focus on them. When I can think straight – then I can think straight for my kids too. I realised so much about myself. I’m 40 years old, but sometimes it takes talking to a stranger to make you realise you’ve got issues!”

Angela goes on:

“The service has really helped me to be able to focus on improving relationships with the people dearest to me. I became homeless last year and my relationship with my family broke down. Since then I hadn’t been able to see my two youngest children at all. Now, after starting to attend the counselling sessions, I’ve been able to meet my two youngest children twice, because of my improved relationship with their father. The counselling has really shown me that in order to build relationships with other people I need to look after myself. It’s opened up possibilities for me and I have things to aim for. In the future I would like to become a counsellor myself, working with vulnerable people with drug and alcohol problems.”

# For more information see Appendix
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# Relationship and Parenting Skills Project - Groundswell Evaluation Report
Dean’s story

When Dean split up with his long term partner, the mother of his daughter he had to leave the family home. Not knowing where else to go, he headed for the churchyard in South London where his Grandmother was buried. He slept rough in the churchyard for six months, drinking very heavily.

Eventually he found his way to London Bridge. There, Dean was identified as a rough sleeper by St Mungo’s outreach team, who found him accommodation.

He first stayed at St Mungo’s Rushworth Street emergency shelter, before being moved to our Great Guildford Street hostel. Dean made a lot of progress at Great Guildford Street hostel. Dean made a lot of progress at Great Guildford Street hostel and, with the support of the staff, progressed and moved into his own flat in Bermondsey in May.

In the end he chose to go to detox, and stayed for about two months whilst the hostel kept his place open for him, to return when he was ready.

He returned to Great Guildford Street and, with the support of the staff, progressed and moved into his own flat in Bermondsey in May.

To help Dean move on with his life and rebuild his relationships with friends and family he took part in Relate group workshops. The workshops have helped him to get closer to his daughter and other important people in his life.

Dean says:

“At the time, I was desperately trying to get in touch with my daughter and needed to feel like there was hope and that I was going in the right direction. The Relate group workshops really helped to boost my self-confidence and my faith that I could make changes in my life and rebuild my relationship with my daughter.”

Dean is now back in contact with his daughter, who lives just round the corner from him. He now works as a volunteer outreach worker in Lambeth, gives speeches and talks on his experiences, and is involved in the Cardboard Citizens drama group at the Crisis Skylight.

External evaluation of the St Mungo’s and Relate Relationship and Parenting Skills Project

St Mungo’s Relationship and Parenting Skills Project was judged by independent consultants, Inukshuk, as having a strong positive impact on all four of the following criteria:

- **Enhancing Control**
  Being in control of the decisions that affect one’s life; the ability to shape circumstances, to set goals and to have belief in one’s own capabilities are all key to one’s mental wellbeing.

- **Increasing Resilience and Community Assets**
  Emotional resilience, or the extent to which a person can adapt to or recover in the face of adversity, can be increased through good diet, exercise, spiritual and other community engagement and the avoidance of alcohol and drugs.

- **Facilitating Participation**
  Being involved and engaged in activities outside one’s immediate household (cultural and leisure activities, volunteering, etc) also promotes mental wellbeing.

- **Promoting Inclusion**
  Factors that prevent equal access to opportunities in society include poverty, disability, poor physical and mental health and unemployment. Homeless men and women are therefore recognised as one of the most socially excluded groups in society. Inclusion, or a sense of belonging, is key to mental well-being.

Following two workshops held in June 2007, Inukshuk found that the project offered:

- Raised self-esteem, sense of self worth and confidence of clients, which in turn is helping them to stabilise their lives and access support services more effectively

- A feeling of being heard, valued and respected which helps to build confidence and trust in services

- An increase in social relationships – which has a significant impact on mental well-being

- An opportunity for clients to have space, stability and support for reflecting on their lives and making changes to improve their situation.

8 Two workshops were held in June 2007 with St Mungo’s clients and staff where participants assessed the positive impacts of the service on four areas known to affect mental wellbeing, as defined by the Department of Health’s Making it Happen guidance in 2001.
Conclusions

- Relationship breakdown remains a real and major cause of homelessness. The percentage of homeless men and women who cite relationship breakdown as one of the causes which led to their homelessness has risen from 12.9% in 1999 to 41% in 2007.

- Families, friends and other social networks improve mental wellbeing and therefore aid homeless people in all aspects of their recovery, including their physical health, substance use issues and employment prospects.

- St Mungo’s and Relate’s Relationship and Parenting Skills Project creates positive outcomes for its clients. People who have attended counselling or group skills workshops can boast raised self-esteem and confidence and an increase in social relationships.

- The staff training delivered through St Mungo’s Relationship and Parenting Skills Project has led to a significant increase in knowledge, confidence and skills in recognising and tackling relationship problems and in mediation for its participants. This enables St Mungo’s staff to address their clients’ relationship issues with confidence and sensitivity.

Recommendations

- St Mungo’s calls for a commitment from central and local government to tackle relationship breakdown as one of the trigger points that leads directly to homelessness.

- Funding for the St Mungo’s and Relate project must be provided beyond March 2008 in order to build upon the work done to date; helping many homeless men and women to rebuild broken relationships and develop new networks of support.

- Information about the project should be disseminated across the homelessness sector, to share good practice and encourage other agencies to support their clients’ recovery in similar ways.

- All staff working on the frontline in the homelessness sector should be supported to help their clients to rebuild ties with family and friends wherever possible.

References

- A Future Foretold: New approaches to meeting the long-term needs of single homeless people, Crisis, 1999

- Homelessness and Loneliness: The want of conviviality, Crisis, 2000

- Mental Well-being Impact Assessment on St Mungo’s Relationships Project, Inukshuk, 2007

- St Mungo’s and Relate’s Relationship and Parenting Skills Project Annual report 2006-07

- British Association for Counselling and Psychology policy briefing to Department of Health 2002

- Relationship and Parenting Skills Project – Groundswell Evaluation Report

Appendix - St Mungo’s Relationship and Parenting Skills project user data

Forms filled in by those who accessed the Relationship and Parenting Skills project give us the following information:

- Percentage of clients who are accessing Relate one-to-one counselling: 77%
- Percentage of St Mungo’s clients as a whole: 55%
- Percentage of clients who accessed service: 56%

Clients’ reasons for accessing the service:

- Improved understanding of relationships: 73%
- Emotional support: 76%
- New communication skills: 58%
- Improved skills for managing conflict: 73%
- Improved parenting skills: 78%
- Increased confidence: 16%
- Support from external agency: 78%