



Raising awareness about homelessness: Hosting an event

Gerry Skelton, Belfast Metropolitan College

Background

For the last five years Belfast Metropolitan College has hosted a Homeless Awareness Panel (HAP). The day has always been within the scope of the annual Homelessness Awareness Week in Belfast and NI. This helpsheet offers some pointers for social work academics wishing to increase student awareness of homelessness by holding a similar type of event. It explains the factors which have led to the success of this particular Homeless Awareness event. It has been compiled from a set of interviews conducted by SWAP with students, service users, event attendees together with the organiser.

“The myriad issues confronting the social work profession generally and practitioner specifically, can be readily viewed through the prism of homelessness. Indeed, arguably homelessness is not simply a practical reality but goes to the very core of one’s physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual identity and resultant self esteem.” (Gerry Skelton, HAP organiser)

Aims of a homeless awareness day

The Homeless Awareness Panel was originally conceived to challenge four basic assumptions, namely:

- Social work (education, training and practice) often does not take homelessness sufficiently seriously in Northern Ireland and the UK generally.
- The housing and homeless sectors can often be a competitive rather than co-operative working environment.
- The competitive working environment is not conducive to advancing the resolution of many homelessness-related issues.
- Carers and Service Users have an important part to play in shaping SW education, training, research.

[See what reasons participants gave for attending the event](#)

Steps to a successful event

I choreographed a unique approach, characterised by a series of interlocking steps.

STEP ONE

Build student awareness, capacity and expectation beforehand, to help them contribute positively to the event.

STEP TWO

Ensure the Homeless Awareness Panel is diverse (include range of policy people, people who are responsible for large organisations; middle managers, workers, carers, service users as panellists and audience participants).

STEP THREE

Begin to generate publicity in anticipation of the Homelessness Awareness Week (HAW) and Homelessness Awareness Panel event.

STEP FOUR

Keep the panel confidential.

STEP FIVE

Brief panel members about make up of audience (mostly social work students, coupled with a selection of invitees from a range of backgrounds) and what you would like them to focus on.

STEP SIX

Vary your audience by inviting a range of individuals and groups.

STEP SEVEN

Prepare service users well beforehand and keep their involvement confidential.

STEP EIGHT

Continue to raise student awareness of homelessness in class before the event.

STEP NINE

Recruit a 'Volunteer Team' of students.

STEP TEN

Establish the right tone on the day.

STEP ELEVEN

Chair the event giving each speaker 15 minutes to present. Once everyone has spoken, a Question and Answer session can follow.

STEP TWELVE

Find out three key things your participants have taken away from the day.

What did each step consist of?

STEP ONE

Build student awareness, capacity and expectation beforehand, to help them contribute positively to the event. There are many ways to do this. I elected to do the following:

- Homelessness was highlighted as a major thematic lens in classes leading up to the panel through which various social care / social work issues were viewed.
- The HND final year students were taken to visit a homeless hostel before the event. The visit involved meeting homeless people and participating in a forum about the reasons for homelessness. The visit itself was not directly related to the event and was initially designed to test HND students readiness to take part in the day. However, it was also hoped that this would enhance the student, residents and staff capacity and familiarity in anticipation of the HAP. Informed by their experience of the visit the HND students were also more confident about asking questions in front of an audience of more advanced social work students.
- An initial request was issued asking for 'volunteer' students to become part of the homelessness Awareness Panel Volunteer Team (HAPVT). They would play a pivotal role in supporting some of the planning and preparation and, on the day, be highly visible (wearing specially commissioned T-Shirts, sponsored by SWAP) and obvious points of contact from participants (meeting and greeting, PR, accompanying service users, etc., etc).

STEP TWO

Ensure the Homeless Awareness Panel is diverse (include range of policy people, people who are responsible for large organisations; middle managers, workers, carers, service users as Panellists and audience participants).

The 2010 Homeless Awareness Panel comprised:

John McManus (Assistant Principal Officer, NI Housing Executive)

Tony McQuillan (Director, Shelter NI).

Ricky Routledge (Director, Council Homeless Northern Ireland)

Sean Smith (Manager of HomePlus)

Stephen Potter (Social Worker, Salvation Army)

Sean Kane (Chair of Suitcase/former service user)

Man-Kong Choi (Chair of Salvation Army Resident Committee and current resident)

Gerry Skelton (Panellist Convenor/Chair)

The following made opening comments:

Marie Therese McGiven (BMC Director and Chief Executive)

Rebecca Johnson (Social Policy and Social Work Subject Centre)

STEP THREE

Begin to generate publicity in anticipation of the Homelessness Awareness Week (HAW) and Homelessness Awareness Panel event. I planned and prepared a press release, choosing a homeless hostel to visit (with four students) and including it, students, service users and staff in the resulting photoshoot (with the required informed consent duly secured).

STEP FOUR

Keep the panel confidential. Confidentiality is a core ingredient for diffusing combativeness and generating excitement around the event. However it does mean that the success of the event is down to the person putting it together. Part of the organiser's role is to keep extending his contacts in hostels, housing providers, etc. This is central to ensuring the Panel is never the same each year and the invited audience are different too.

STEP FIVE

Brief panel members about make up of audience (mostly social work students, coupled with a selection of invitees from a range of backgrounds) and what you would like them to focus on.

There is a danger that if you don't brief all participants properly an individual may harangue other panel members. Also panellists can be tempted to use the platform to grandstand on a couple of issues. It is important that the chair is clear about the format and prepared to challenge people if they are not following the purpose of the day.

STEP SIX

Vary your audience by inviting a range of individuals and groups.

Historically, this has included a diverse range of voluntary, statutory, private and community organisations (directors, chief executives, senior and mid range managers, practitioners, etc); as well as carers, service users, clergy; academics, unemployment/employment personnel, support groups, etc. This is what I refer to as the 'amplification effect'. Furthermore, the HAP involves organisations whom people generally don't consider have anything to do with homelessness (e.g. Samaritans, enhanced employment service, counselling agencies, outreach service for migrant workers, etc).

STEP SEVEN

Prepare service users well beforehand and keep their involvement confidential.

In our case all service users invited onto the panel were met in person (by myself) beforehand to discuss what their participation involved. For every one or two service users invited the organiser met ten or twelve. Sometimes a participant is unable to attend on the day. This is another reason for keeping participation confidential – since nobody else knows who has been invited there's no embarrassment should they not turn up. However, you do need to be prepared to take the hit if the audience say why didn't you invite so and so.

STEP SEVEN....continued

The initial meeting should be in a venue selected by the service user (either the hostel or an associated place. Good partnership with trusted hostel staff facilitates this too). Provide a contact number and a further invite to a second meeting at the college to talk through practicalities, including a visit to the HAP venue (BMC Main Lecture Theatre). This also afforded an opportunity "...to do a talk and walk through" (Gerry Skelton) about what the event and day involved. Once agreed, a third meeting at the college was arranged for participants to put a powerpoint show together, with myself and a support worker.

STEP EIGHT

Continue to raise student awareness of homelessness in class before the event.

The event is a good opportunity to raise student awareness of homeless support networks as well as of groups which are not well supported (for example there is no hostel for migrant workers in Northern Ireland at the moment, nor for homeless women, apart from Women's Aid). An event like this is also a good opportunity to demonstrate how service users and carers can be involved. It also allows bridge building between teaching and the event. You can say for example 'at the homeless awareness panel, for instance, we'll have service users who might be reflecting on the importance of social work – and the impact of it and bad and good social work intervention!'

STEP NINE

Recruit a 'Volunteer Team'.

This is pivotal to my approach, as I consider students to be the college's service users and this enables them to be involved in some of the core planning and preparation. Consequently, social work students (2nd years are on placement) and final year HND students are canvassed and invited to express an interest in getting involved. This has an added value of facilitating student contact across the SW and HND programmes, encouraging 'Buddying-Up' contact and the exchange of ideas, experiences, and a shared endeavour. A small selection of the team then volunteered to accompany myself and the BMC publicity team to a homeless hostel. This was used to generate publicity for the HAW and HAP. The resulting press release can be accessed on the following link.

www.belfastmet.ac.uk/?news_item=203

STEP TEN

Establish the right tone on the day.

It is important to establish an atmosphere which is conducive to the seriousness of the issue but also to ensure participants engage. I used a shout out to get people talking and smiling with great effect.

Exercise 1: Smiling

Smile to the person behind you or in front of you and introduce yourself remembering to smile

STEP TEN....continued

Exercise 2: Shout out (and clap)

Let us know if you are:

- A BMS 3rd year Social Work student ?
- A BMC 2nd year SW student?
- A BMC 1st year SW student?
- A BMC HND student?
- A former BMC student?
- A student from another College / University?
- Those who are BMC staff?
- Those who are staffing the stands?
- Those who work in a homeless hostel or homeless sector?
- Those who are (or have been) residents in a homeless hostel.
- Those who are Carers?
- Those who are qualified social workers?
- And finally...Those who I have forgotten?

I use these 'energisers' to:

- Establish a climate of welcome and positivity
- Bridge-build between the various experiences we are about to have!
- Identify who you are as individuals as well as groups.
- Process a bit of our nervous energy!
- Remind us all that we are gathered as people among people...not just actors on a stage, performers and audiences!
- A fool proof way to ensure I forget nobody – it will be more a case of you forgetting yourself
- It will also give you a few names to note for follow up discussion in the break or conclusion of this formal part of our morning.

STEP ELEVEN

Chair the event giving each speaker 15 minutes to present. Once everyone has spoken, a Question and Answer session can follow.

STEP TWELVE

Find out three key things your participants have taken away from the day.

In this case we elected to ask our external sponsor SWAP to interview participants. Analysis suggests that participants valued notable changes in student attitudes to homelessness; the potential of education to offer a safe space to foster community discussion and the motivational nature of the event.

Conclusion

Analysis of interviews carried out with participants after the event showed that the HAP had been very successful in raising their awareness of homelessness.

In particular students had valued the opportunity to hear service user experience and find out about organisations they did not know about.

[See what participants said they took away from the event](#)

Acknowledgements

With particular thanks to all those who agreed to be interviewed after participating in the Homeless Awareness event.

Gerry Skelton, Social work and counselling lecturer and practitioner, and the originator of the Homelessness Awareness Panel: which has become an annual event for Belfast Metropolitan College. Gerry is also the Chair of the HAP on the day and responsible for much of the planning and preparation that goes into it.

Man-Kong Choi, resident of Centenary House. Man gave a key presentation at the event. He is very involved in the day to day activity of the hostel, especially in his role as Chair of the Residents Committee, and its training programme. His ambition is to become a social worker and he is actively pursuing this aspiration.

Helen Nelson and Ruth Carter, both final year BSc Social Work students at Belfast Metropolitan College. They were both volunteer helpers at the event.

Mary O'Brien, APSW and Operations Manager, Mental Health Team, Belfast Trust. Mary works with people who have severe enduring mental illness for a variety of reasons. These include people coming out of institutional care, their placements breaking down or because of certain behaviours find themselves homeless.

Sean Conlon, Chair of HomePlus an organisation supporting economic migrants destitute in Belfast. He has worked with homelessness for the past 13 years and has been a former panellist.

Fionnuala Gorman, final year health and social care student. She was a part of the volunteer team at the event and is thinking of going on to study social work or nursing.

Jean Kelly, social worker. Jean works across a number of settings including hostels, child protection teams and gateway teams. A particular issue facing her at the moment is the growth of economic migrants and sourcing resources for support for them.

Sean Kane, Chair of SUITCASE (a service user group funded by Eastern Drug and Alcohol co-ordination team). The group is funded for two years and the training Sean has taken has given him a focus to get back to employment and look for a career in the caring field. Sean was a panellist and gave a presentation at the event.

Useful resources for teaching homelessness

DVD on Homeless Youth: Early Intervention in the UK. This DVD was produced by Dr. Joan Smith Cities Institute, London Metropolitan University as part of the EU Framework 7 funded project Combating Social Exclusion Among Young Homeless Populations (CSEYHP) For a copy email c.redwood@londonmet.ac.uk. An accompanying toolkit is available at:

www.movisie.nl/homelessyouth

Housemate is an educational resource on housing options and homelessness for young people aged 11-18 has been created by Shelter Cymru. The overall aim of the pack is to reduce future homelessness and housing need among young people. Designed for use in schools it includes interesting exercises on various aspects of housing and homelessness and links to dvds.

www.housemate.org.uk

UK Coalition on Older Homelessness: working together for older homeless people has some useful publications on older people's experiences of homelessness.

www.olderhomelessness.org.uk/?pid=107

The Centre for Housing Policy at the University of York was established in 1990 with the support of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. The site links to several useful housing sites and homelessness projects which can be cited in teaching.

www.york.ac.uk/inst/chp/



Reasons given by participants for attending the event:

"I didn't really know anything about homelessness. I'd always had this stereotype that we'd talked about today about being drunk and on drugs and things like that but talking to those people today who spoke to us I realised that everybody can find themselves homeless."
(Fionnuala Gorman, Final Year health and social care student)

"I asked Gerry if I could come along .. it's a brilliant opportunity to let social work students know about homelessness – that's it's not just the stereotypical alcoholic male who sleeps on the street – its a multifaceted realm covering all aspects of social care. The event [reminds them] that whatever service they go into there may have been historical homelessness within that group or clients may become homeless in the future...' Events like this are very important...they plant a seed in people's minds they may never come across a homeless person again for years but the hope is that when they do they will remember that there is a lot more to this person than being homeless."
(Sean Conlon, Chair of HomePlus)

"I believe passionately that my voice needs to be heard for better services ...treat us an individual treat us as you would treat anyone else .. they [the students] don't know enough."
(Sean Kane, Chair of SUITCASE)

"I want social work to take this (of homelessness) seriously and to be impacted by what they hear from the policy people, the managerial people and housing homelessness and the social worker on the panel. I particularly want final student social workers to know that in six months time - when they are qualified practitioners - homelessness is not something that they will be able to gloss over or relegated to something that Gerry Skelton said in class."
(Gerry, social work academic)

"I wanted to get as much information as possible so I can offer the best service possible – and I was a previous student and attended this last year too." (Jean Kelly, probation officer)

"I debated whether it was an effective use of my time [to attend] and I thought it was! I was challenged by today. One it made me remember why I wanted to be a social worker .. and secondly why I wanted to be a manager which is about being an agent for transformation and strategically delivering services. [The day has] fired me up to go and look at the ways we involve service users .. to [look at ways] of getting back to the core basic values of what we are trying to deliver."
(Mary O'Brien, Manager, Mental Health Team, APSW)

What participants took away from the event:

“You can see how everything connects up with the different areas mental health, child protection its just a big issue and that’s probably the one thing I’ve taken away from the day its not a separate issue it’s the whole society ..” (Ruth Carter, final year social work student)

*“We knew some of the big organisations but some of other ones we’d never heard of .”
(Ruth Carter and Helen Nelson, final year social work students)*

*“I just think bringing the whole forum together service users, service providers and students who are going into the profession and having a debate and discussion around that is fantastic.”
(Ruth Carter, final year social work student)*

*“I think it is important for the student social workers and social workers to hear from a service user and how they find it and what they need to do to make things better.”
(Man-Kong Choi, resident of Centenary House)*

“it was nerve-wracking ... I believe passionately that my voice needs to be heard for better services ... [but] its good the students are taking on more of an interest than qualified social workers..” (Sean Kane, Chair of SUITCASE)

*“Service user and carer involvement is very important to me I think we’ve overcomplicated it and I think today again taught me that is doesn’t have to be over complicated but it is important at listening, asking the right questions and also being open to the answers and open to the challenge.”
(Mary OBrien, APSW / Manager, Mental Health Team)*

“[looking back] there has been a change in the idea of service user involvement in the profession..talking to a couple of students on the way out they seemed interested in what the service users had to say [and] that fills me with a bit of hope that service users will be given the respect they need and that’s what I thought today was very good for..” (Sean Conlon, Chair of Home Plus)

*“The fact that one of the service users had come out of the care system astounded me because it shows that homelessness can happen at any age... Today has been a real eye opening experience! When somebody your own age or near your age is involved I think it becomes a wee bit more real to you, you know... I think as a social worker we need to be aware of [homelessness] so we can empathise better with our service users.”
(Helen Nelson, final year social work student)*

*“I think one of the other things I’ve found about today is...providing somebody with a home isn’t enough, particularly for young people coming out of care. The loneliness and isolation they would face and maybe some of them have found themselves homeless that haven’t actually had a place when they came out. There is that human element - you can’t expect to put provisions in place and leave people to it; they need a support network around them in addition to a home.”
(Helen and Ruth, final year social work students)*

“[it was] fantastic seeing all the different programmes and different levels that they actually have over there and meeting with some of the service users that was here today and some of the staff it just really changed my view of homelessness. I’d definitely like to follow it up if not working with it then possibly volunteering I really do feel influenced by this process and the discussion.”
(Ruth Carter, final year social work student)

“[The event] allows practitioners to know what is out there. If we don’t know what’s there we don’t know how to work it .. you’re only as good as your social worker and if your social worker doesn’t know then you’re not going to know’ [one thing I will be taking away] is the support for migrant workers ...” (Jean Kelly, probation officer)

“One thing I’ll take away from today? Well I’ve got more confidence .. it motivates me more to reach my goal [of being a social worker] because I want to be able to come out the other end and say these changes need to be made and get them done .. I don’t think it’s a subject that will ever go away so the more people know about it the more support hopefully we can get and make things better.” (Man-Kong Choi, resident of Centenary House)

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Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Social Policy and Social Work (SWAP)
University of Southampton School for Social Sciences
SO17 1BJ

Tel: +44 (0) 23 8059 9310
Email: swapteam@soton.ac.uk