

The
next
stage

“Having
our say”

Hearing the voices
of homeless people
in Edinburgh

Having our say – 2010

Each winter there are homeless people looking for a place to spend the night. Bethany Christian Trust provides Care Shelters which are open from early November until early April. Initially these were in Edinburgh and now there are also Care Shelters in Inverness, Aberdeen, Stirling and Dumfries.

About the Care Shelter in Edinburgh

The delivery of the Care Shelter draws together the contributions of volunteers from many churches across Edinburgh – there were 777 volunteers in 2010–11.

The location of the Care Shelter changes. People gather at a well-established pick-up point in central Edinburgh and get transport to the church hall that is providing the Shelter that night.

People get a mattress and blankets and there is a hot meal.

There is a small staff team who give continuity and bring expertise in dealing with the issues that affect many people who are homeless.

Volunteers are usually linked to the church that is hosting the Shelter that night. They cook and serve the food, set out the bedding, organise clean clothes and sometimes access to washing machines and showers. Some volunteers stay through the night and are there to talk to people if they want this.

In 2010 Outside the Box worked with Bethany and other voluntary organisations to gather the views and experiences of people who used the Care Shelter in Edinburgh during the winter of 2009 –10 and to carry out an independent evaluation of the service. We published a report in May 2010 – Having our say: The voices of homeless people in Edinburgh – which is available on the Outside the Box website.

- The report confirmed the need for the winter Care Shelter and the valuable impact it has.
- A large proportion of the people using the Care Shelter in Edinburgh were from Poland and other Eastern European countries whose nationals have very limited rights to services in the UK. They needed to use the Shelter more often than people from the UK: they were a quarter of the people using the shelter but half the overnight stays were by this group of people.
- The evaluation showed the importance of the volunteers' contribution.
- People using the Care Shelter and the volunteers made suggestions about ways to improve opportunities for people who are homeless.

Update – what has happened over the past year

Bethany used Having our say and the related postcards and posters in several ways.

- They disseminated the report to elected members and officials at City of Edinburgh Council and to other organisations that had responsibility or influence for the services that are provided for homeless people in Edinburgh.
- It was used as part of discussions and planning between organisations, to improve the overall services provided for homeless people in Edinburgh.
- The report was fed back to each of the churches in Edinburgh who support the Care Shelter, to show the volunteers what impact their work has.
- The postcards and posters were distributed to community resources across Edinburgh to help raise public awareness about the need for the Care Shelter.
- The report opened discussions with the Polish Consulate about the issues facing people from Poland who became homeless.
- The findings helped with the planning and provision of new Care Shelters in other towns in Scotland. They showed the impact that could follow if a service was established.
- Bethany used the report as part of raising awareness of the situation affecting people who are homeless with MSPs.

Many practical developments have followed over the past year.

- Even more churches and individual people in Edinburgh have offered to help Bethany provide the Care Shelter.
- Bethany has used the feedback to improve the service for people using the Care Shelter where this is possible.
- New Care Shelters have been established in Stirling and Dumfries. Here, the local authorities are contributing to the costs and giving help in kind to complement the support that is coming through partners such as the Salvation Army, volunteers and local churches.
- Bethany has used the report to show that people using the Care Shelters are taking responsibility for their lives, contribute to their wellbeing and support each other. It has helped change some of the perceptions about people who are homeless.

Example of how the feedback from people using the Care Shelter was used

One of the points people raised was that they would like a later closing time each morning.

The scale of the Edinburgh service has made it difficult to implement this suggestion there. There are almost 30 local church halls providing the accommodation and some have other activities happening on weekday mornings so cannot change the time. Bethany found that having different finish times on some days was not realistic – one of the features that everyone likes is the certainty about the arrangement, no matter which venue the Care Shelter is at.

However, the plans for the new Care Shelters in other places were able to build in an earlier start time and later closing time from the outset.

The Stirling service has been developed in partnership with the Salvation Army, who provide a daytime service each day that people can move straight on to if they want this.

Hearing the views of people in 2011

We gathered information about what was happening for the people using the Care Shelter in Edinburgh through 2 routes.

- One was the regular information that Bethany gathers – numbers of people using the service every night and basic information about everyone. Bethany also have fuller information from people who choose to share this with them, including people who receive a higher level of support such as getting additional help them get access to other services.
- Outside the Box gave people an opportunity to feed back their views to someone who is independent. This work is part of the Working Towards project which is part-funded by the Big Lottery Fund.

Outside the Box fed back to people at the shelters on what Bethany had done. We again asked their views on how the Care Shelter worked and the types of services they would like to see for themselves and other homeless people.

The survey took place in March, at the same time as in the previous year. By that date there were around 30 people using the Shelter each night, and they were mostly people who had used the service frequently throughout the winter. We received feedback from 18 people. The people who took part included those from the UK and those from other countries.

We also received the full monitoring information which Bethany gathers about the pattern of use and the information that people share with them.

Many of the points that emerged in last year's report were raised again 2011. People really value Care Shelter, believe it makes a real difference of them, and would like it to be available throughout the year.

People who use the Care Shelter who took part in the independent survey by Outside the Box used the opportunity to record their thanks to the volunteers and staff who make the Care Shelter possible.

"Just thank you for the amazing service."

"Thank you for the effort on the shelter."

"Good, so nice, keep it up!"

The people who use the Care Shelter

This was the level of use which people made of the overnight Care Shelter in Edinburgh during the winter of 2010 –11.

- 757 people used the service at least once.
- 5,915 bed spaces were provided.
- 6,612 meals were served.
- The average use of the service each night through the winter was 43 people. The average use was higher in the colder periods.
- Half the people using the service used it only once.
- 632 people used it on more than 28 nights (so more than the equivalent of 4 weeks over the course of the winter).
- 22 people used the shelter on over 80 nights.

This year, 73% of the people using the service described their nationality as UK and 19% were Polish. The rest came from a very wide range of countries.

The ages of the people using the Care Shelter again ranged from under 21 to over 60.

People had been homeless for varying lengths of time – from a few days to several years.

For a third of the people, losing their job was the reason, or one of the reasons, they became homeless – this was the most frequent factor identified by those who provided additional background material to Bethany. Other circumstances that were often a contributing factor were a relationship breakdown and alcohol problems.

While people are at the Care Shelter they can ask the Bethany team for help, such as negotiating access to other services or helping them think how they can tackle an aspect of their life and situation.

Many people sought help on matters related to their being homeless and moving away from this, such as getting a tenancy and other housing issues (61%) or getting help on managing money (13%).

Almost 1 in 5 people (17%) were looking for help around education and/or training, such as access to a course that could help them find a job or improve their general skills.

People also looked for help around their health and wellbeing: mental health (16%), physical health (13%), and/or dealing with alcohol issues (20%) or drug

issues (13%). For many people their ill health and disabilities were both a cause of being homeless and a consequence of being homeless, especially rough sleeping.

We asked people as part of the survey from Outside the Box how things had been going for them generally over the past year.

Just over half the people taking part said things were going better for them than before. Some people gave examples, such as looking for a job and looking ahead.

"Getting better."

"Good, OK."

"I have been trying to look for a job and not have to use the shelter again."

Just under half were having a difficult time. For some, their mental health was not so good. Others described setbacks that had happened and which had contributed to them being homeless and having to use the Care Shelter.

"Lost my job and the flat, so not so good."

The situations that all of the people using the Care Shelter are in would probably be described as 'bad' or 'very bad' by most people in Scotland. The fact that so many of the people who were using the Care Shelter felt positive about how things are going for them says a great deal about their resilience and ability to cope.

The feedback from people at the Shelter and information from staff also highlight ways in which people who are homeless are trying to change their situation and make a positive effort in very difficult circumstances.

People's experience of the Care Shelter

The features of the Care Shelter that people value most often are having a place to sleep, being in a place that is safe, the food and the contact with the staff and volunteers.

"Food, safety, warm place to sleep."

"Nice folk, everything."

"The meals, a warm bed, people I can talk to, both volunteers and other people in the same situation as me."

"Everything."

"The food is amazing."

"The strong people that work here."

Most people felt the service itself was very good as it was. Longer opening hours, especially in the morning, remains a change people would like to see in the Care Shelter – although it was a smaller minority who raised it this year. A few people expressed concern about people who had been drinking or using drugs coming into the Shelter. There is an existing policy of not allowing entry to people affected by drink or drugs, and people wanted to see this followed more strictly.

Overall, half the people who had used the Care Shelter the previous year thought it was about the same as before and almost as many thought it was better this year. Only one person thought it was not as good.

“I like this service and feel it meets my needs.”

“The services offered are already more than I knew were available. Everything basic we need is already supplied.”

“Great for when it’s cold, keep shelter open a little longer.”

People told us about the benefits they get from the Care Shelter. The benefits that most people described were having a place that was safe and warm, where they could get rest, and the food and company. The Shelter also helped people survive over the winter period by helping them keep themselves clean and have access to clean clothes.

“Survival and company.”

"Rest. A break from the cold."

"Refuge from the winter elements."

The main change that people wanted to see in the services Bethany provides was the Care Shelter being available all year round, or at least sleeping facilities for people who have nowhere to go. This issue was raised by most of the people who contributed their views.

A few people suggested other developments in services by Bethany or other organisations for the winter period or for year-round support. These were more access to accommodation and a broader range of daytime services.

People also suggested more opportunities for people to have company.

"Have the Shelter all year."

"A drop in centre all year round."

"A kind of daytime provision, to prevent people just walking the streets and getting into vices such as shoplifting."

"Places for us to stay."

"Somewhere to meet others."

"Just access to blankets, sleeping bags and ground sheets/cardboard. I think this is already offered but there needs to be more. The blankets and ground sheets from the winter shelters can be reused or given out."

What next?

Bethany will continue to use the feedback from the people using the Care Shelter to help them improve the services they deliver and to show the continuing need for services of this type.

These are suggestions by Outside the Box on ways Bethany and other organisations can respond to the views of people who are homeless.

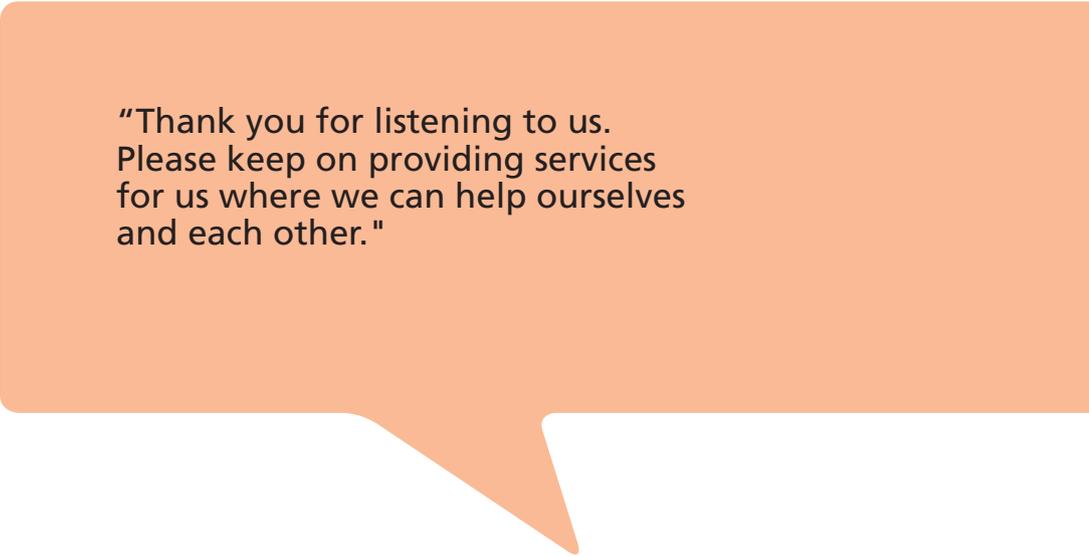
Suggestions for Bethany

Continue to raise awareness about the circumstances of people who are homeless and the ways they can work with those planning and delivering services to make life better for themselves and others.

Continue to work with other organisations to extend the opportunities for homeless people to get access to learning, employability services, money advice and other supports that can give people more opportunities.

Look at the policies and practice in how staff at the Care Shelter responds when someone is affected by alcohol or drugs.

Relationship difficulties are frequently raised by people using the Care Shelter as a reason for them becoming homeless, but relatively few people are looking for support on this issue. Bethany could look at ways to give people access to advice and support on tackling or learning to live with relationship problems. One example could be working with other organisations to develop information and advice that people can use in their current situation and help them get access to more support at a later date. Another approach might be longer-term preventative work with other organisations to help people find ways to strengthen relationships when they are under financial and other pressures.



**"Thank you for listening to us.
Please keep on providing services
for us where we can help ourselves
and each other."**

Suggestions for other organisations and people making decisions about services for people who are homeless

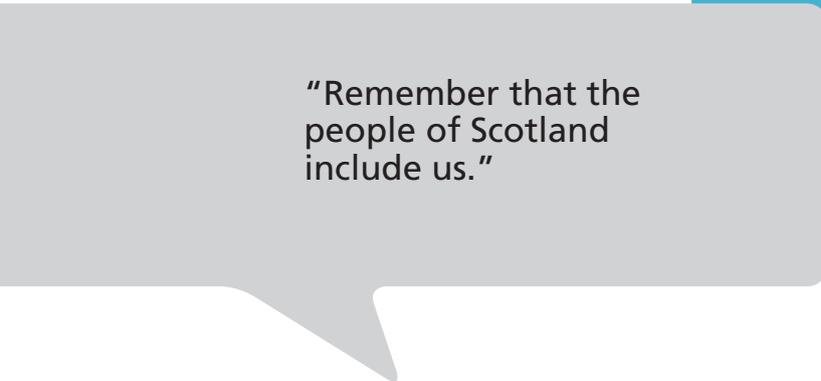
Look at the ways in which you hear the voices of people who have experience of being homeless.

Create more opportunities for people who have been or are homeless to get access to services such as employability support, learning, money advice and other ways to help them move on in their lives.

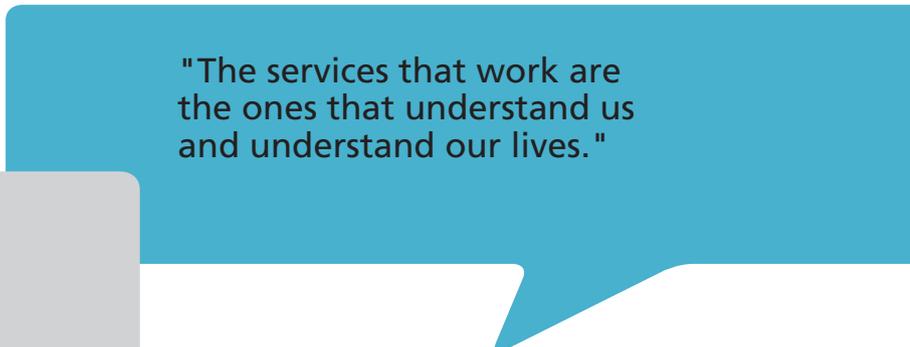
Work with Bethany and other organisations in other places providing short-term or overnight support to people who are homeless to find ways get easy access to the range of health care services for people who are homeless.

Look at ways to bring together examples of services in Scotland which are doing good work on reaching homeless people and improving their access to support for their health and wellbeing and other aspect of their lives. People with experience of being homeless and organisations like Bethany which provide services to them should have a significant input to identifying what makes an effective, homeless people-friendly health care service.

Look at opportunities to build a peer support element into all services for homeless people, to remind people who are homeless – and everyone else – about the skills and capacities that people do have.



"Remember that the people of Scotland include us."



"The services that work are the ones that understand us and understand our lives."

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