TOGETHER NETWORK

Relational Working and Homelessness: *An Evidence Review*

Executive Summary

Centre for Housing Policy

November 2019: This executive summary has been produced by CUF and the Together Network, based on the full research report produced by Mark Bevan and Deborah Quilgars at the Centre for Housing Policy at the University of York.

Introduction

The concept of relational working and its potential role in shaping national social policy has been the focus of much recent attention and academic study. The term relational working can and has been used to describe a range of practices, but broadly encompasses the ways in which agencies and practitioners approach working with individuals, and also with each other, to deliver services that enable people to build new relationships and to flourish in those relationships.

This paper is based on a report on relational approaches to addressing homelessness. Commissioned by Church Urban Fund (CUF), the Centre for Housing Policy at the University of York undertook an evidence review to explore: what it means to take a relational approach to addressing homelessness; the benefits and challenges of adopting a relational approach to address homelessness; and the potential distinctive contribution of a faith-based approach to relational working. Here we present a summary of their findings.[1]

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1 The full report is: Bevan, M. and Quilgars, D. (2019) Relational Working and Homelessness: An Evidence Review, York: Centre for Housing Policy, University of York.

Method

The review consisted of three elements.

First, a narrative literature review was undertaken of the available evidence relating to relational working. Second, exploratory qualitative interviews were held with service users: four focus groups and two telephone interviews were undertaken with 23 service users from Positive Pathways (a five-year homelessness programme in Yorkshire overseen by the Together Network in partnership with CUF).

The focus groups and interviews explored the views and experiences of participants of the Positive Pathways service. Third, semi-structured interviews were held with other stakeholders: eight telephone interviews were undertaken with a range of practitioners, policymakers and academics to explore their views on, and experiences of, relational working in homelessness.

The review draws upon CUF's definition of relational working, which describes five practices that demonstrate how this approach can be implemented. These practices are: listening to each other, interacting face-to-face, recognising our interdependence, partnering as equals, and persevering through difficulties.

1. What does it mean to take a 'relational approach' to addressing homelessness?

At its heart, a relational approach to addressing homelessness is an approach that values and encourages the development of relationships not only for their intrinsic worth but also for their power in driving transformative change in people's lives. As one stakeholder commented:

'My understanding of it [relational working] is that underpinning change is engagement and underpinning engagement is relationship. So rather than expecting someone to do X, Y and Z, to effect change, we would start with the concept of developing a good relationship with a supportive member of staff or even someone outside of the sector, someone who will support you. From that basis, you are much more likely to see results rather than putting someone through a process… people help people, not processes.'

Projects that take a relational approach therefore emphasise the centrality of positive relationships between clients and staff; relationships which are underpinned by trust and connectedness, that are non-judgemental and focus on the client's priorities rather than those of the service (see Robinson, 2017). Most of the stakeholders interviewed emphasised their understanding of the principles underpinning a relational approach. For example, one respondent felt that whilst they did not use the term 'relational working' to describe their own work, the definition provided by CUF nevertheless described the approach they were taking in terms of an open access policy that:

'…values relationship building with service users equally or as the first step before the practical housing and benefits and perhaps more task-centred work, an equal value on the social benefits and emotional benefits of our work as well as the concrete outcomes.'

This first section of the literature review undertaken by the University of York focuses on the practical steps that agencies can take to apply relational working in the context of homelessness. Four key themes emerged.

THE FOUR KEY THEMES:

The role of the support worker.

Research shows that practitioners can help to build and sustain relationships and support the social networks of homeless people by: supporting couples; helping to manage detrimental relationships; investing in collaborative inter-professional working; and building proxy social networks for clients i.e. building relationships that are more akin to friendship than that of a housing support professional. It is widely recognised that tensions can arise here between offering stability through friendship and encouraging dependency, but the most important qualities in managing these tensions are mutual trust and respect (McGrath and Pistrang 2007).

The role of volunteers and mentors.

Studies highlight the important role that peers and mentors can have in promoting and supporting positive relationships and social networks, particularly those peers and mentors who have a shared experience of homelessness. Shared experiences serve to build trust and rapport, creating pro-social relationships that help to facilitate recovery (Barker et al 2018). Barker and Maguire (2017) note that organisations can use peers in a variety of ways including as formal, one-to-one mentors, informal supporters, group facilitators, and also to link clients to professionals.

Interdependence and independence.

CUF's definition of relational working highlights that while it is positive to encourage independence, we also need to recognise that dependence on others is part of the human condition and essential to living in community. Practice models should have strategies to develop interdependence not just independence. For example, young people leaving care should be helped to develop and maintain supportive relationships and useful social networks, and not be expected to live independently, with no need of assistance. A commentary by Lemos (2006) discussed the role of support workers in facilitating interdependence as well as independence, and sets out a framework for recruiting, developing and managing staff with this remit.

Online relationships.

Social media can create socially inclusive, safe spaces for people who have experienced homelessness; however, research shows that networking online can also be socially unfulfilling and potentially dangerous (see for example Oliver and Cheff 2014). A key conclusion from this research is that services working with homeless people should be mindful of the opportunities presented by ICT and social networking sites (specifically in this case Facebook and WhatsApp), and support their healthy use (Rice et al 2012).

2. What are the benefits and challenges of adopting a relational approach to addressing homelessness on the ground?

Service users of the Positive Pathways projects expressed largely positive views about their experience of relational working. One service user commented on the unconditional attitude towards practical support they had experienced at Positive Pathways compared with statutory services, the latter which could be "frightening". Others commented on the openness and availability of help at any time, including late at night: "they tried to help me like a brother".

Whilst some respondents stressed that they only appreciated the practical help received from Positive Pathways, others discussed the value of being able to talk through emotional issues. The supportive environment to deal with emotional problems was experienced "like a second family". One respondent noted how important it was to have somewhere you could open up and talk – an aspect of the service that helped people to deal with anxiety and isolation.

Several service users valued the opportunities for social contact at Positive Pathways projects, having somewhere safe they could relax and enjoy other people's company (both service users and staff members), commenting: "[it's] nice to get out… made a few friends out of all this, doing this"; "you can have a chat if you need to have a chat, its good like that". In addition, some participants stressed the benefits of specific social or well-being initiatives, such as a meditation group.

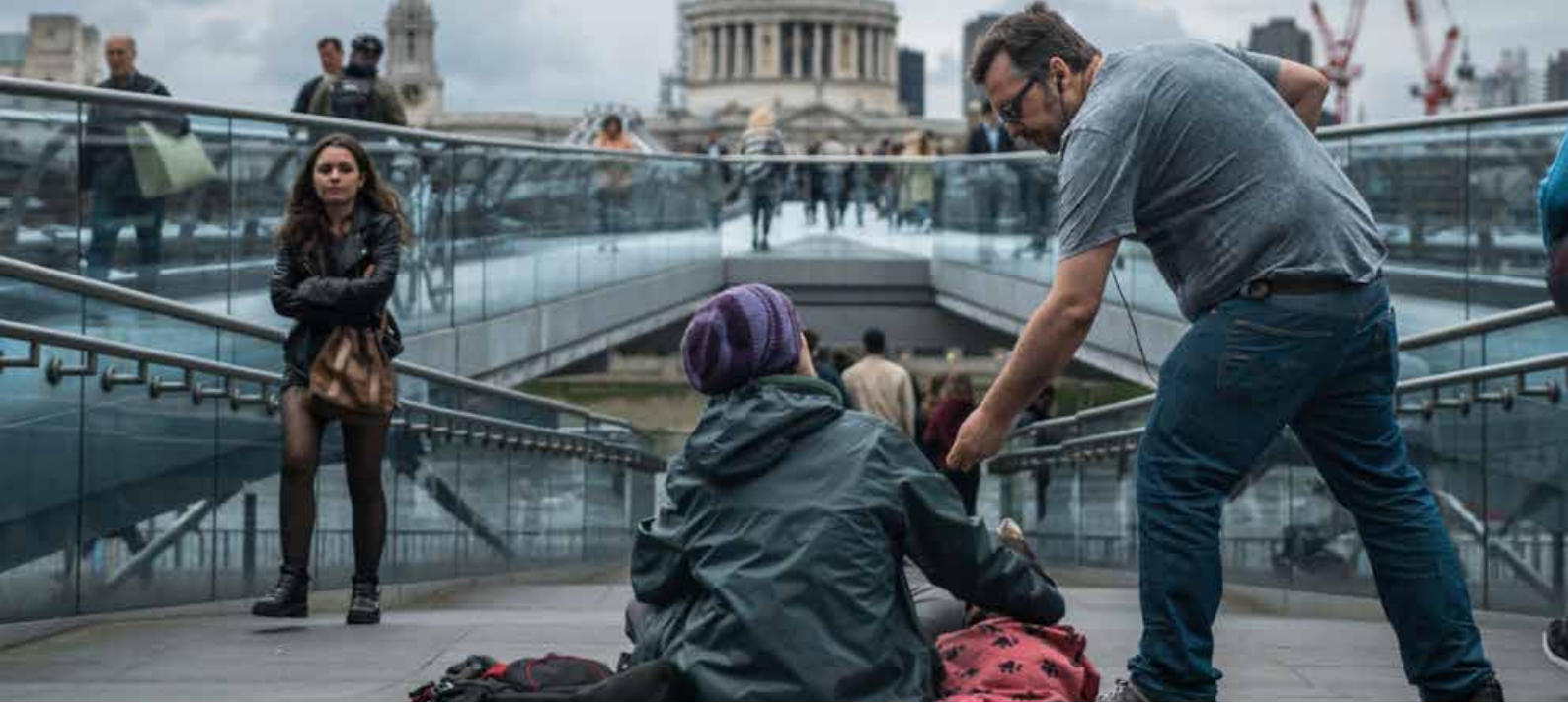
There were mixed views about contact with volunteers. Some respondents had little contact, or felt little connection with volunteers. Others valued the support they had received, enjoyed the social interaction, and had maintained contact even after they had stopped using Positive Pathways' services. For some individuals, their experience had led them into volunteering themselves.

However, a couple of interviewees made the observation that the ethos of embracing and accepting all people can have negative consequences for other service users as a result of the anti-social behaviour that can be displayed by some. This therefore has an impact on the extent to which Positive Pathways environments can be considered 'safe' spaces.

Practitioners and academics interviewed were also largely positive about the principles underpinning relational approaches and of the potential positive outcomes of this way of working:

> *'It [a relational approach] is the only way to make a connection sometimes, if you are homeless due to personal reasons rather than systemic reasons, I think connection is the only way to put your hand in and pull somebody out.'*

Yet they recognised the tension between empowering people and also challenging them to move forward:



'I think the biggest skill we probably need is robust relationships that can be saying to people that we are here for you, we are meeting you where you are, but we don't want you to stay where you are, we want you to make steps in directions that you want to go in.'

Several respondents noted that one of the principal challenges of a relational working approach was a difficulty in measuring outcomes and providing evidence of progress that could be tied to this approach. And yet to others, there is a fundamental contradiction in trying to measure the impact of relational working within an outcomes-based framework:

'I would defend the position quite strongly that a relational approach, if it is founded on measures of efficiency, cannot really be relational, it can't be grounded in love or compassion, because it is always in the expectation of productivity and denies the person from whom productivity is expected of falling and starting again, there is no second chance. That is the logical conclusion it seems to me of an outcomes-led approach to support.'

A further potential challenge of relational working mentioned was the impact of this approach on staff. There were several aspects to this issue noted by respondents. In addition to issues of maintaining boundaries and safeguarding, respondents flagged the training and management implications for organisations working with volunteers. A couple of respondents mentioned that a relational approach should also be mindful of staff and volunteer burnout and give space to staff to reflect and process their own experiences.

Respondents emphasised a range of implications for drawing a relational approach into policy and practice. They expressed a desire for a national and local policy environment that would enable not only relational working with people who have lived with homelessness, but also a collaborative framework between partners and agencies:

'There needs to be a system that has much more cohesion to it, and means that there can be a relational hand-holding throughout the process, a single individual if possible or at least someone who is overseeing it and working through these things with you, so you are not having to deal with a different person every time. We call it the relational gel… A holistic approach to homelessness requires two things, the first is that you need to have a systematic approach that is strategically bringing together the different partners in a given location, so that pathways out of homelessness are joined up without gaps, but that in of itself is not enough, you have to overlay that with a relational dynamic that brings consistency of hand-holding to the individual of the entire process to make sure that they are not at some point wandering off or falling through the cracks of the system.'

3. What is distinctive about a faith-based approach to relational working?

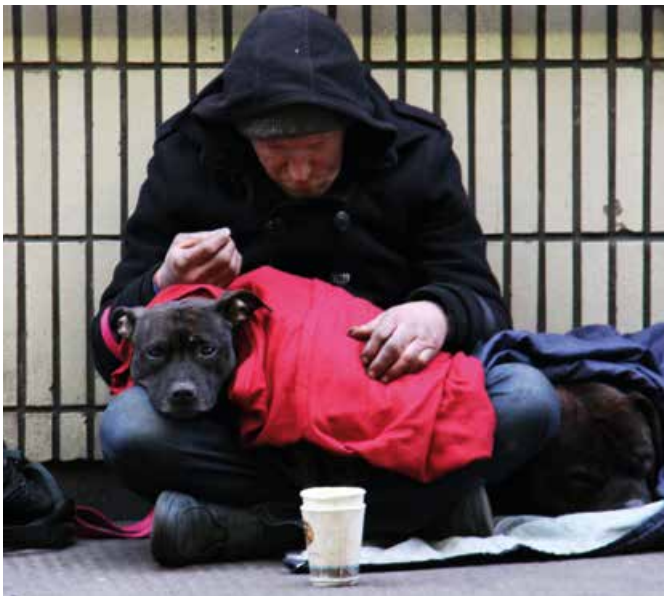
Research shows that the services offered by faith-based organisations (FBOs) are often very similar to other NGOs with regard to homelessness services. Yet a 2009 study concluded that while the visibility and explicit practice of religion in most project programmes has diminished significantly over time, FBOs still tend to have a 'presence orientated' approach that aims to establish a satisfying relationship with clients (Johnsen and Fitzpatrick 2009).

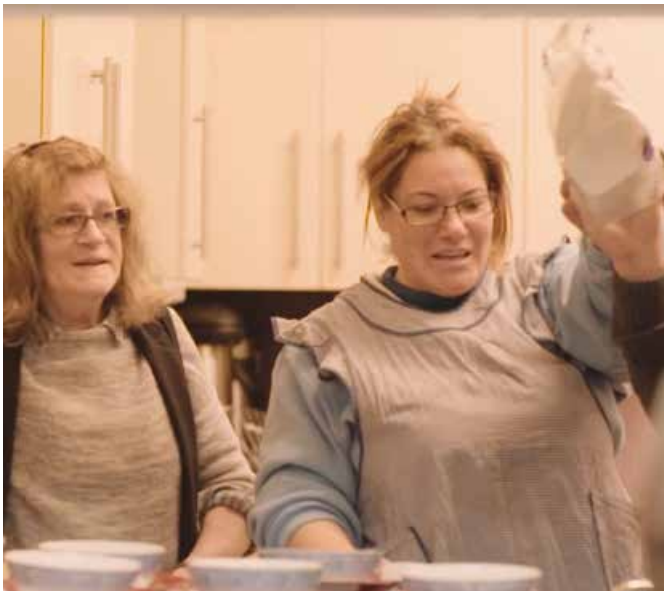
This can be clearly seen in the number of faith-based projects that have sought to create and maintain safe spaces that are underpinned by unconditional accessibility (as compared with conditionality within welfare provision). Bowpitt et al (2014) draw upon a theological perspective with regard to how 'places of sanctuary' in the UK are conceived in service provision. They define sanctuary as underpinned by the theological notion of grace whereby:

> *'To be places of sanctuary, day centres have to rely largely on trust mediated through the kind of resourceful, open-ended friendship that was found among staff and volunteers who respect the freedom and capacity of even the most damaged people to rebuild their lives in their own way and their own time.'*

For some, taking a truly relational approach also means offering people opportunities to build a relationship with God. A number of faith-based projects therefore offer additional, often informal, 'spiritual' elements including the provision of chaplaincy services, prayer, or opportunities for scriptural study.

Research showed that these activities can have a mixed impact. Some homeless people reported actively avoiding faith-based services due to prior negative experiences with faith groups (most commonly religious schools), or their assumptions





regarding the potential risk of being 'preached at'. Others, however, sought out FBOs because they had a faith or wanted to explore questions of spirituality (Johnsen and Fitzpatrick 2009). One stakeholder interviewed was circumspect on this point, and stressed the need to avoid manifestations of conditionality that might be linked with FBOs, perceived or otherwise. For example, this respondent noted that a relational approach should also encompass honesty and transparency so that people can make a judgement about engaging with a service where there may be a 'faith' element.

Authors Kuhrt and Ward (2013) argue that faith-based responses to homelessness should be distinctive in building relationships based on both grace and truth. This is because "In the person of Jesus, grace and truth are synthesised and cannot be separated."[2] Grace would be shown through: unconditional acceptance of all people; compassion; treating people as guests and offering hospitality; focusing on people's rights and being willing to give people another chance. Truth would be shown by: enforcing rules and maintaining boundaries; administering justice; challenging and empowering clients as well as focusing on their personal responsibility; treating people as clients and conducting assessments.

Their critique is that too much church or faith-based activity focuses on "giving free meals, free accommodation, love and acceptance". This help can exist in isolation from the support being offered by other agencies and so can be in danger of undermining the efforts of others to encourage people to recognise their own agency and take responsibility for decisions that are within their control. "If there are multiple places where people can get 'a second chance' it can lead to people regularly being 'saved' without ever having to face a challenge about what they need to do about their situation."

To them, this is offering a form of grace which has become detached from truth. They argue:

> *'The main point is that both grace and truth are both vital ingredients of change.*
>
> *What's more, there is a positive dynamic that can be harnessed between the two. The availability of grace and acceptance can help people accept the truth about their situation and be empowered to take steps away from the streets. There will always be tensions to manage – helping people with complex problems will always be complex – but the transformation of a person's situation is hardly ever due to the help of just one agency. To be effective, we need each other. The key factor is that churches and professionals overcome the gap and work together. This is the complexity of compassion in action.*[3']

A faith-based approach to relational working, they argue, should therefore be characterised by relationships – with service users as well as other agencies – built on grace and truth. There is a need for churches to communicate with other caring agencies regarding the support they give, and to coordinate the provision of services. Otherwise there is a risk that people are maintained in the situation they are in as they move from place to place, with little incentive to engage with services on a deeper, relational level which fosters personal responsibility and change.

2 https://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/articles/the-practice-of-grace-and-truth-with-homeless-people/

3 See their blog on the topic at https://gracetruth.blog/2018/10/25/bridging-the-gap-between-churches-and-professionals-the-complexity-of-compassion-3/

Summary and Conclusions

Relational approaches to addressing homelessness acknowledge and value the role that relationships can play in transforming people's lives. At its best, relational working enables friendships between housing support staff and service users that both accept people where they are and also encourage and empower them to move forward. Relational working is also important at the inter-agency/project level, with professionals and volunteers from different organisations collaborating to ensure that a relational approach can exist at the systemic level.

A faith-based approach to relational working is in many ways similar to non-faith based approaches that value relationships: they both need to manage the tension between friendship and dependency, between accepting people for who they are and encouraging them to make changes. Yet Christian responses are uniquely sustained by the example of Jesus who demonstrates the importance of relationships based on grace and truth. The challenge is to live out these two characteristics equally, in all aspects and at all levels of work with homeless people.

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