



Welcome to our Winter/ Spring Newsletter 2009



As we all celebrate more sunlight, more greenery and perhaps less snow, it's time again for another collection of interesting and inspiring articles and letters from HUG members and friends from all around the globe.

Happy Reading from all at HUG

HUG is the Highland Users Group, a network of users of mental health services across the Highlands

Membership of HUG is open to anyone who has experienced a mental health problem. *Just write to, phone, or email us and leave your name and address – it's as easy as that!*

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Note: The views expressed by our members in this newsletter are not necessarily the views of HUG.



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Feature on a HUG member

- What is your name and tell us something funny about yourself?**
Neil Crabtree from Golspie. I like cycling and drinking beer but not at the same time!
- How long have you been involved in HUG, and what kind of things do you do?**
I've been involved in HUG for around six months and am getting involved in interviewing people about changes to incapacity benefits.
- Who has had the biggest influence on you?**
A project worker Jennifer at the Gatehouse project who is eternally optimistic and caring.
- What is your favourite food?**
Curry
- Who would you most like to meet?**
Jo Brand—I think she is incredibly brave to stand up in front of a bunch of blokes and rip them apart (in the nicest way of course!).



Interview Request — Incapacity Benefit



Many of us are very worried about the changes to incapacity benefit.

If any of you have been taken off benefits recently or have had your benefits reviewed we would love to hear from you. We want to monitor what is happening to people and Neil is very keen to chat with anyone who has been affected by changes to benefits.

This would involve a short written or phone interview. If you would like to take part please contact the HUG office and Neil will get in touch.



Update from Graham

REPORTS

Since the last newsletter we have only sent out two reports, one on what makes for a healthy workplace which has so far had the following reaction :

A MENTALLY HEALTHY WORKPLACE (INVOLVED 98 PEOPLE)

Comments and actions:

"...just read the employment report and thought it was wonderful. The testimonials were fantastic, truly moving (and so true)"

Service User (Highland)

"I really enjoyed reading your report and agree that the best way to reduce stigma in the workplace is to reduce the them/us divide. This means promoting mentally healthy workplaces for all workers...."

Consultant psychiatrist.

"Congratulations on HUG's brilliant and inspiring publication " a mentally healthy workplace". I would like to print off copies to put on a stall at the Royal College of Psychiatrists conference on choice next week...."

Service User (England)

" Another great report. Thank you. I have forwarded it to our Director of Public Health.... I thought your report would help raise the profile of mental health and try to get some positive action started around the recommendations from users..."

Director of Community Care, NHS Highland

"this is an excellent report and neatly sums up the key areas for a good working environment for everyone. I am sure I will use it to influence our thinking."

Highland Home Carers

The Disability Working Advisory Group in the British Council used the report as a basis for discussion at one of their meetings.

It was also placed on the website of the International Initiative on Mental Health Leadership.

And one on local issues that affect us across Highland to which we have had quite a limited response. We only send the local issues reports out to a few people as basically its just a list of issues for managers to pick up on and our more active members to use to try to achieve change but if any of you want those particular reports sent to you regularly then feel free to phone us and ask to be put on the mailing list.

Because the DVLA in all their delightfulness have said that Graham can't drive since his last illness he has had plenty of time to get up to date with reports and no chance of coming to visit you all. (hopefully that will change and he'll be coming to your house, drop in centre or meeting place soon.) in the meantime we have draft reports on:

- The police and mental health
- The impact of being diagnosed with a mental illness
- What we call ourselves (user consumer survivor?)
- G.P's and Health centres.

Most of these are close to completion so hopefully they'll be popping up on your computer or dropping through your letter box soon.

HUG Communication Project Workers' Update

Quick update on the work we have been doing since the last newsletter.

Heidi

Social Inclusion and Recovery DVDs

These new resources for Emma's training and external anti-stigma work are coming along well. I am in the midst of editing and am pleased to report we captured some fantastic thoughts from HUG members on both subjects.

We have had over ten members involved in these projects already and I'm looking forward to organising the content with a focus group in the next couple of weeks.

Completion of the projects is still on for the end of March and if you are interested in finding out more please get in touch.

Library of Personal Testimony

We are still working on growing our DVD library of personal testimony that could be used in our training. I have about five waiting to be edited and finished off to add to the library but am always looking for more.

If you would be interested in sharing your testimony on film for our training let us know.

Events: Highland Recovery Network

I was very please when I heard the Scottish Recovery Network were supporting an initial meeting to discuss the creation of a Highland Recovery Network. The meeting turned out to have a wide range of interest; lots of professionals but unfortunately not so many service users (partly because I found out about it too late to let you all know in advance !). However, it was clear we were all keen to share what recovery practice was already happening in our different areas and to look at what being in a network might mean.

Leading on from this, I attended a follow up meeting this February with a couple of other individuals who were passionate about taking this forward to discuss the next steps. We decided that we needed a website as an information point that we could encourage others to share their info on groups, teams, meetings etc.

Not sure what the next step is going to be but I will keep you informed as the network progresses. If you are interested in finding out more or being involved in the initial stages please let me know.

WRAP—Wellness Recovery Action Planning

Good news is that my joint proposal to do WRAP training in the Highlands, with Denise Eadie from NHS Highland, was accepted and given funding. We have our first information event on the 18th of March at Inches Church (more details later in the newsletter).

Places are free and we are hoping for a really good turnout form both service users, professionals, carers and supporters. Book your place ASAP!

Also in your newsletter this month is an application form for WRAP courses. We have funding to run three so places are limited, but if you are keen to develop your own WRAP then please fill it in and send back to me at the office.

Emma's Update

Work with young people in schools



"The students definitely benefited from your expertise and I also learned a lot too! I specifically spoke to some of the girls who have been supporting a girl who is self-harming and refusing to accept adult involvement and they now feel stronger and more informed since your input. That in itself is a great outcome."

Guidance Teacher

In January and February I and HUG members headed up to Ullapool to deliver two sessions with S3 pupils in Ullapool High School. The kids were amazing and engaged in the sessions with great enthusiasm and interest. A special thank you to Lorraine, Kenny and Marja-Liisa for speaking so openly with the pupils and making the sessions such a success.

Empowerment Film

I have been having a lovely, busy time over the last couple of weeks arranging the visit of our colleagues from Barcelona who are coming to Scotland in March to make a film about 'Empowerment and Users' Associations' (see article from Ricard in newsletter).



We are very excited and thrilled that HUG has been selected as a model of good practice in user groups (user associations) and Ricard will be zooming around filming HUG members and other key people across Scotland about the role and value of groups such as HUG.

The film will then be shown with Europe (mainly Poland, Romania, Portugal and Spain) to encourage the development of user groups in these countries.

If anyone is interested in being involved **call me quickly** (!!) as Ricard will be over the week commencing Monday 16th March.

Media Work

Comic Relief – launch night on Friday 13th March 2009

We had some fantastic news recently from Comic Relief, who are funding us for another 3 years for all our work around the creative arts and mental health. So we were even more thrilled when one of our younger members, Kenny, was selected to go down to London this week to the BBC TV studios to be filmed for the launch night of Comic Relief on Friday 13th March.

You will have to watch carefully as Kenny's story will last around 20 seconds are part

of a wider 3-4 minute montage of people's experiences of living with mental health problems. However this is a really exciting opportunity for HUG and Kenny, who will be rattling his way to London on the Sleeper then hitting every guitar shop in central London!!!! (if I know him at all.....)

Handpict Productions

Kenny will also be featured as part of a documentary (with the working title of 'Teenage Minds'), which has been commissioned by BBC Scotland and is following eight young people from across Scotland, who have experienced a range of mental health problems.

The documentary will be an hour long and will be screened towards the end of the year.

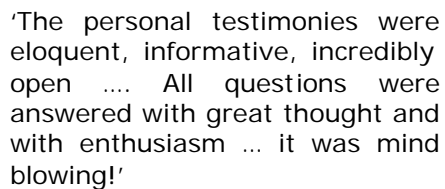
The Highland News

One of our HUG members has recently done a fantastic interview with Helen from the Highland News about her experiences of self-harm. The feature article isn't out yet, but should be in the next week or two.

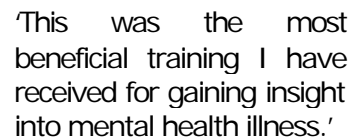
Mental health awareness training

Since the New Year we have delivered training as part of the Mental Health Officer training programme (for the North of Scotland) and to second year nursing students at the University of Stirling Highland Campus.

Both sessions were incredibly well received by the people we were training, and we at HUG left with a spring in our feet and the knowledge that the training had made such an impact and been so well received.



'The personal testimonies were eloquent, informative, incredibly open All questions were answered with great thought and with enthusiasm ... it was mind blowing!'



'This was the most beneficial training I have received for gaining insight into mental health illness.'

If anyone would like to know more about HUG's mental health awareness training, media work or work with young people do please give us a call!!!!

Hello Cruel World

8

Hello again readers.

We're just over the peak of the winter and I'm in a negative mood. So what am I going to write about? I had plenty of ideas, but I didn't fancy any of them in the end. Here's a list of some of the things I decided not to write about. The things I've been going on about recently (sick of them). What it's like to be dead but not really (too weird and heavy). Some random things (too much like what I'm always writing). My unreliability (too much like the subject I had last time, my disorganisation). So I decided to get all personal, like. I hope you don't mind.

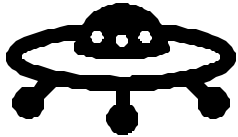


This isn't really my kind of thing at all, you see, it's sort of a last resort. A dusty get out of jail free card stuck to the bottom of my bag of tricks. But today I feel that all the other tricks would make a rubbish column, at least for *Hello Cruel World*. I'm less fussy about *It Is What It Is*, my daily write, but that's a different, more sloppy kind of thing, it's only on the internet and has a smaller readership than this. But I should really be getting on with this, the word count is slipping away from me while I'm prevaricating.

I have a delicate relationship with the outside world. I find it rather interesting, in small doses. Especially the people. People are extraordinary. I can get by rather like you can get by abroad if you have a phrasebook level knowledge of their language. It's different with some people who know me quite well, I am sort of more myself with them in a way, I think, but I'm not sure. I don't always think I know myself very well, and sometimes I envy people who I think must have a better handle on me than I have on myself.

I can't really see the wood for the trees. It's been that way for as long as I can remember. I always had trouble answering those 'what's wrong with you' questionnaires, as for so many questions the honest answer would have been 'yes and no, depends exactly what you mean, and I'm not sure which is the real me anyway'.

And they never let you put that. For instance, am I an extrovert? Or am I an introvert who is compensating? I've never really known the answer to that sort of thing, and it was all I could do to stop thinking about things like that. But that just adds to the general vague problem vagueness - I just don't know what's wrong with me.



I feel like an alien in some ways. In the way I view you lot, for instance. We don't really understand each other, and we're not really the same, but I'm quite fond of you all the same. Sometimes one of you passes quite close in your spaceship to my spaceship and we have radio contact for a few minutes and this for me is a powerful moment, and as we part I wave you on your way with my hanky and a tear in my eye. But I am happy to do so, for it's at such moments that I really feel truly alive, and I couldn't share a longer time with any of you, I would grow less fond of your silly Earthling ways and start to share my thoughts on exactly what the ten worst things are about the person you are. I've strayed too far from reality there. This is supposed to be personal, not fantastical. But it's hard to reveal what I don't know! Actually, it isn't, is it? We can meet people and get some insight into them which they lack themselves very quickly indeed. But is it correct? That's the thing. Any of us can get the wrong idea about any of us. I don't help with my self-ruminations, if any of you have any wrong ideas about me it's probably because of something I've said. Possibly even in this *Hello Cruel World*. I can't honestly swear that much of the above is true.



So, where does that leave us? It leaves us with a load of words about not much (it's not really a lot of words, but it's even less content). I should a) try to cram in some more things about me before the end and b) promise you that the next one won't be about me so much. Okay, I am writing this on something called 'Write Or Die' which helps me by hassling me if I stop. It's working quite well for me. I'm now however a bit paralysed by the rapidly declining word count. Eight hundred and fifty words I was asked.

Keir Hardy
850 Words (exactly!)

Telling your story or any other story!
Creative Writing Group

For the last year we have been running a creative writing group which meets every three or four weeks in Inverness.



Last year we held a free residential weekend up near Abriachan near Loch Ness in the Moniack Mhor writing centre. There were about 13 of us there, as well as two writer tutors and staff from Moniack. We had a wonderful time and created a lot of new material and made new friends.

Some of the comments people had about it were:

"The opportunity to go away for a weekend just to write and forget about every day life"

"The whole thing; the writing, the tutors, the people, the food, the location."

"The peace and quiet, meeting new people , using a part of my mind that has not been used in a long time!"

"Having a break from routine; attending a meeting just because I wanted to, not because I felt I

"It was great to hang out with other like-minded people and have a laugh without having to hide mental illness."

Moniack have kindly agreed to run a free weekend again. This will be held on:

Friday 5 June to Sunday 7 June 2009

Any HUG member is invited to apply to come to the weekend Just phone or email the HUG office as soon as you can so that we have an early idea of numbers coming along.

If you can't attend the weekend but like writing or poetry then we have a publication in which we feature members' stories and also a blog on which you can place your pieces and read other peoples work; again just phone us for details.

Highland Care Programme Approach Co-ordinating Service

Incorporating:- NHS Highland , Highland Council, Highland GPs,Northern Constabulary, Users and Carers, Voluntary Organisations. Drummoissie Unit, New Craigs. Telephone:01463 253610

Care programme approach (CPA is a service aimed at people, 16 years or over, with severe and enduring mental illness and/or learning disability living in Highland, who have complex health and social needs and require on going care and support.

The CPA would like to invite service users and/or their cares to come along to an informal evening to find out about CPA or ask any questions about CPA. This will be held in:

**Inshes Church, Inches Retail Park Inverness.
Thursday 19 March 2009(6-9pm)**

Three sessions are available (6-7pm/7-8pm/8-9pm). These sessions can take the form of group discussions or one to one chats. Please let us know your preference. If you are intetrested please contact us by the 2nd of March with your details. William Proudfoot – CPA Office – 01463 253610
Dave Smith – NSF Highlanad Carers – 01463 704660

Fitting

The thing is, he said,
Your confidence has taken a hell of a knock
It'll be years to get better
And you'll never be free.

It's anxiety you see
Generalised Anxiety – Disorder, says he.
Oh and Depression, - that's the thing
Depression and Generalised Anxiety Disorder.

I'm dazed, I'm sad.
It can't be that bad.
Never be better? Drugs for three years?
I wander off crying but no wet tears.

I can fight this; I've learned how.
Battle's with reality now.
Already, I have turned things round,
Generalised Anxiety Disorder and Depression.

Fitting – that's the thing.

By Joanna

Letter from Romania

Last issues we updated you on the HUG involvement with the pan-European project Grundvig. One of the participants from Romania has written to us to share his experiences of detention, treatment and recovery.

I'm Ioan Ciotina. I'm a 33 year old Romanian man. I'm a user of mental health services since August 1992, when I was diagnosed with schizophrenia. I live in Botosani, a town in north-east part of Romania, close to the border with Moldova and Ukraine.

When I was 17 I relapsed for the first time and I went to the psychiatric hospital in my town, where I stayed for almost two months. There I took medicines and I received the treatment I needed. I was treated by a very good psychiatrist. My family visited me in the afternoon of the same day when I was put in the hospital. I told them about the conditions and they encouraged me to resist and to be patient.

But because I was taken from home by the police, alerted by one of my neighbours, and put in the hospital (this happened at 1³⁰AM) I thought that I was in a jail. Many men were walking in the hall, dressed in pyjamas. Most of them were smoking and had very strange look; strange eyes in fact. I was scared because of this. Only in the morning I realised that I'm in a psychiatric hospital. I was put in a room with 12 beds and all night long the other people in the room were playing cards, joking and when I tried to fall asleep they started to prevent me falling asleep. After three days I felt I could not stand such conditions.

For this reason I left the hospital with no permission, but I was caught by two citizens on bicycles. Afterwards I was kicked badly in part of my room – by my colleagues and one servant. After this I was bound hand and foot to my bed.

After an hour my mother visited me in the hospital. I told her what happened and about the conditions in which I lived for the last three days and she talked this over with my psychiatrist who permitted me to leave the hospital. I stayed at home for only three more days.

My psychiatrist foresaw that this might happen and told my mother his concerns. After three days I came back to the hospital; I accepted to stay in hospital to treat my illness but I asked the psychiatrist to put me in a little room with less patients, because I saw that this kind of rooms existed in the hospital. I asked this for one simple reason: I wanted to rest. Otherwise the drugs which I had been given could not have the right effect.

He understood me and put me in a room with six beds, with very calm patients. This was a very good thing I had managed to arrange. It was very important for me. After approximately two months I left the hospital (with my psychiatrist's permission of course). He asked me to take drugs at home for a one year period and asked me to visit him monthly for monitoring.

With efforts I graduated from secondary school in 1993 and I succeeded to take the final exams and diploma in August 1994. In this time my family and some of my friends were encouraging me. This helped me to become more self-confident in my capabilities.

In the autumn of 1994 I started to volunteer at a new local private radio station. This was for only two months. There I learned a few interesting things, but the time was passing. In the next year I worked with an affiliate of another, more important, radio network from Romania. Here, in the news room, I met very kind people and I learned how to be a radio-reporter. I stayed in that radio station for a very short time and I then worked in the same field for different private employers, but I earned very little wages.

In 1997 I relapsed again. I stayed in psychiatric hospital for six months, till August of the same year. I obtained a pension because of my illness. During this time I got married in 1999 and had a variety of jobs. But my marriage didn't last too long and I divorced after only two years of marriage.

In 2001 I relapsed again, because of the stress and harassment from my ex-wife's parents and relatives. I stayed in the hospital for three and a half months. Afterwards I heard about Estuar Foundation Social Center in Botosani from a girl with mental health problems that lived next door to me.

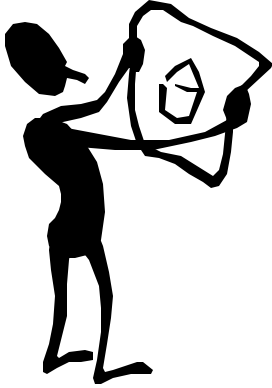
I decided to visit the foundation and there I was welcomed by the social worker at that time, a young woman, and by the coordinator of the centre. The social worker had a talk with me and encouraged me to attend the centre. After that I attended almost daily and I found new friends.

In 2004 and 2005 I represented the Botosani Estuar Foundation users at the 'Forum in National Mental Health Policies' which was held in different towns in Romania. In 2008 I was sent by Estuar Foundation as a trainee to attend the training modules of "Trained Today To Train Tomorrow", which were held in four different countries: Poland, Spain, Romania and Portugal. Beside the training itself I had the opportunity to visit some places in the towns where the training was held. I have from this beautiful memories. This really improved my self-confidence.

At Estuar Foundation in Botosani, where I live, I'm now the editor of our social centre magazine, which includes mainly poems and articles written by the users of this centre. I'm happy to be useful to the others. At the same time I try to improve my life, but it is very difficult to live with merely the pension, which is now almost 45 sterling pounds. I am backed by my family because the life in Romania is very expensive, but I'm happy because I have a girlfriend that understands my health problems and supports me in difficult moments. She isn't a mental health client, and generally, in Romania, people who are not mental health clients often label us as crazy, loony and so on. She is different; she is not that kind of person.



Wellness Recovery Action Planning



Last newsletter featured an article explaining the concepts of WRAP from Denise Eadie, an OT working in Inverness. Since then Denise and Heidi have secured some funding to run a limited amount of WRAP training and information sessions.

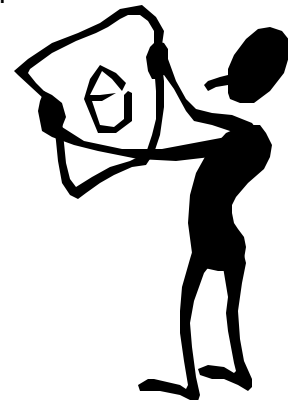
The first of these information sessions is being held on the 18th of March in Inshes Church in Inverness. A poster detailing this is included in your newsletter this month. Please pass this on to others you may think will be interested or pin up at your local GP surgery, community centre, drop in etc.

All are welcome to attend this event including those with an interesting developing their own WRAP as well as those who wish to know more about supporting others with implementing their WRAP.

The next stage of this joint WRAP project is to run the WRAP groups themselves. This is a 12-14 hour course with the aim of exploring recovery and writing your own WRAP.

Included with your newsletter is an application form for attending such a group. Denise and Heidi plan to organise three groups for areas where there is most interest by applicants. The idea being that these groups will be in a location where the members will be able to continue to support each other with their WRAP once the course is over.

Please complete this form if you are interested and either Denise or Heidi Will get back to you as soon as possible.



Views and news from Nepal

In our last newsletter we shared a letter from Matrika Devkota from Nepal. Matrika has been in touch again with news on how mental illness is treated in Nepal.

Dear friends,

Warm greetings from Nepal. You may know, Nepal is in the process of constitution writing process. Mental health issue has not come out in the society as discussable issue. We have to somehow influence policy makers now.

The government of Nepal as well as donor communities in Nepal totally abandoned mental health in their strategy. There had been arm conflict with Maoist and government for one and half decade. There is totally forgotten about this, the mental health situation has been more worsen.

We have visited National Health Research Council of Nepal and to know the reality: there has not any been any single research done in mental health!!!

I can't not assume about baseline survey on mental health, not at all till this century in Nepal. There has been just an assumption with comparing with low-income countries; there may 25 % percent population are mentally disturbed somehow and have gone out from coping capacity.

There is only one government 45 bedded mental hospital in the capital of Nepal where is practice of medication but no counseling and therapies at all. No one mental illness experience person or their family is known from what kind of mental illness she or he suffered from. It is harder for patient parties that their own person is suffering from mental illness. Rather than that they think it as behavioral problem. As a consequence, there are not family and community supports after the institution. As a consequence the relapse rate is extremely high. There has been a mental health legislation is drafted by psychiatrist which is totally on institutionalization. There is no concept of community mental health program.)

Koshish has realized how to influence in the constitution writing process for inclusive mental health policy and guarantee of rights for mentally ill people. We have realized, **awareness, advocacy** is the most essential. For advocacy, we need to have scientific interpreted data.

Yours comments, suggestions will be highly appreciated and precious for us.

Matrika is very keen to have email contact with some HUG members. If you are interested in getting in touch with him please let Graham know and he can pass his contact details to you.



SAD and Light boxes



I'd like to share with other HUG members something that has changed my life this winter.

For more years than I care to remember, I have suffered from SAD (Seasonal Affective Disorder). Fellow sufferers will be well aware of the debilitating effect that dreich, damp weather, dark mornings and darkness descending before teatime, can have on our mental health. I suppose that many of you out there, like me, tended to go into semi-hibernation and somehow, in a zombie-like state, tried to weather the storm and wait for the renewing effects spring would bring.

However, help is available in the shape of a light box. Last year around September, when the nights started to draw in, I decided to take the plunge and buy a light box from Boots in Inverness. Fair enough, the initial outlay was quite expensive; the box cost around £70/£80 pounds, but once plugged in it costs the same to run as a 60w lightbulb.

If you decide to buy one be aware that a certain amount of self-discipline is required. You have to force yourself to get out of bed and develop a routine. You'll have to experiment with what works for you, but here is how I use it; I have tea and toast at my breakfast bar whilst reading my paper and doing the crossword. Meanwhile, the light box is at about waist level, shining upwards to about the middle of my chin. You don't need to stare in to it, just have it in the periphery of your vision. It's a bit disconcerting at first but you get used to it, just like someone who lives near a main road learns to phase out the traffic noise. It works differently for different people and there are two settings, half-beam and full-beam. All I can say is read the leaflet carefully and follow a process of trial and error.

I find I don't get an instant 'hit', but as the day wears on my visual weariness is replaced by a surge of energy and a feeling of wellbeing. I can cope more easily with household chores and, as a result, because I have used more energy, I sleep more soundly at night.

As you get used to the light box a cumulative effect kicks in. You begin to look forward to getting up and following your routine, knowing that it's going to have a beneficial effect on your mental health.

I'm not trying to imply that using a light box will solve all of your mental health problems, I can only say how it has improved my 'winter-blues'. If you have access to the internet, I'm sure you will be able to find similar testimonials.

I only hope that if even one HUG member can benefit as I have from a light box, then the time and effort I have put in to writing this article will be worthwhile.

Kenny MacIver, Alness

HUG and 'see me'

There will be a new pr company taking on the creative work for 'see me' from April for two years. They are the Leith Agency. Examples of their work can be found on the web. The 'see me' management group will be meeting with them in early May to take this forward. If any of you have ideas about format and methods of communicating the 'see me' anti-stigma message in Highland I would be delighted to hear from you. Thanks to those of you who participated in the Friday forum relating to stigma just prior to the presentations from the agencies that were short-listed.

'see me' has commissioned a piece of research looking at equalities issues in relation to mental health. This is another request for help. I will respond to this on behalf of HUG sometime after March 15th, but it would be really helpful to have some of your input. The six strands of equalities and diversity are: age; disability; gender; race/ethnicity; religious faith/beliefs; sexual orientation or any combination of these. You can contact me through me through the HUG office. Thanks in anticipation of hearing from you!

Chris Evans

My Story, By a Schizophrenic

This story was originally published in 'Perceptions' Winter 2008

1970 saw my first diagnosis of schizophrenia. Ever since then I have been dogged by the diagnosis although I managed to work for a while.

Today, 2008, I am still under the psychiatrist and treatment, but there have been many improvements along the way, although there is some distance to go yet in understanding the disease.

For ten years I was helping with research as a guinea pig and got free evening primrose oil, which helped. Nowadays I buy the supplements fish oil and selenium, which ease the condition. Eventually I got a council flat, and some financial benefits, which are a blessing, if frequently challenging. Although divorced I keep in touch with my former wife and family.

Having been through many medications and treatments they have found a suitable balance of two drugs and I regularly attend the day-centre, which is pleasant.

I have a CPN/ Key worker, a support worker and a befriender. My hobbies are study, writing, music and art, and I eventually bought a laptop computer. Life's reasonable.

Keith Murdock

Living One Day at a Time—How I Didn't Die Today

I have a long long history of feeling down and not coping – the first time I remember is when I was about 10 in the school playground. It was around the time my mother and two of my brothers were all in hospital with different illnesses and my twin friends and companions had moved away. I don't know what happened that day. I just remember hanging out on the edge of everything and everyone refusing to join in, very suspicious and worried about who was going to hurt me or make a fool of me. I refused to 'get into line' when the bell rang and the teacher was very angry with me..

37 years later, I have had frequent and many episodes where I have felt like this throughout my life. I now live alone, this time, suffering and fighting the effects on me of a very short, violent, emotionally and spiritually abusive marriage - and feel exactly the same suspicions, fears and worries and am isolating myself again.

Last weekend I told my sister and a best friend of twenty years that if they couldn't walk beside me and hold me up when I stumble as I walk this hard slow road of recovery then they should leave me alone. My friend had asked the night before how long I was going to stay angry, fearful and confused; how the f**k did I think every other woman who had been through what I've been through managed to cope. My sister had told me nothing had happened to me and that there was no need for the fuss I was making. When I phoned her a year ago for help one of the times I wanted to die she told me stop talking like that – it was upsetting and frightening her. Then she hung up on me. My phone calls this week made them both very angry and they chose to have nothing to do with me.

Then I went on my training course, previously arranged through my work, for the next two nights and two days and was exhausted and thanked for being so supportive to the others who were less able than me on the course. I had made a huge difference to several people's learning and well-being. I saw again that I am highly skilled at my work and it comes naturally to me. It is a compulsion and it makes a good difference to me and those around me.

Today I am on holiday and woke up wanting to die. I had plenty of evidence in the abusers' voices in my head to show what a worthless person I was but again I can't kill myself because my children trust me and use me as a mother should be used. I am very very lucky that my state of mind doesn't stop me being a supportive, objective and wise mother. I know my children know and appreciate they are loved by their parent. They have never known their father. I have seen what suicide and other losses of important people has done to them ... and been a major part of their recovery from the varying effects on each of them. Suicide is not an option for me. Dying seems like an ambition... And sometimes I get very angry about both of these ideas.

I have struggled through today and been very bizarre in my means of coping. I have phoned my husband and begged with him to stop his denial that he hit me and said the things he said. I told him I was broken and had nothing left and pleaded with him to find some compassion for the disgusting pathetic person he saw me to be. I knew even then that it doesn't work like that way.

I phoned the insurance company and shouted a lot at the boy who had handled my complaint some weeks ago. In the end he agreed they were wrong and a direct debit can be activated now.

So, after 18 months of arguing about what it says in his rule book, I won. I didn't get an apology. I'm sensible enough to not wonder why, but I'm angry enough to ask why not.

I thought about phoning the Samaritans but the last time I phoned there the woman said "don't you dare start the martyr with me". So I decide not to.

Breathing Space wasn't open yet and besides the last time I phoned there I was well down my list of incidents that explained my lack of trust and fears of GP's and other health professionals when I realised I sounded like some mad old bat telling stories for attention. I said so and suddenly had the feeling that the young man listening did think that. I said "you don't believe me do you?" And he answered that he was finding it difficult and that there really was a theme of broken relationships going way back that perhaps I needed to look at. He then said I seemed to be getting more upset talking to him so I should hang up. I did. So I decided not to phone them later either.

I phoned the GP surgery to find out the safest way to stop taking the anti-depressants I have been taking for 4 years. I was thinking perhaps the GP was right those weeks ago when I heard her say that there is nothing wrong with me except some anxiety, a bit of depression and that I didn't know how to cope. That was the day I had phoned Breathing Space. I was so confused and angry that I been asked to leave the GP's surgery because she didn't like my attitude. I had been very angry there too. She took my anger as an example of her diagnosis and explained that, really, it was my attitude that was stopping me getting better and perhaps I should see a different doctor. I have been seeing her for 18 months since I asked my husband to leave our home. I realised I wasn't going to get any help from her today.

Then I thought, "Maybe, depending on who answered, I would tell them I wanted to die and ask again - is there really nothing can be done to help me feel better and learn to cope better?" That would be honest assertive and taking real responsibility for myself. The surgery said someone would phone back and sure enough Murphy's law again: my own GP phoned back a couple of hours later. I didn't ask her for anything explaining I didn't really know what I wanted or needed; apologised for wasting her time and thanked her for calling. She said "ok" and hung up.

Continued....

Oh and I did 'healthy' eating. And the feelings of worthlessness went on eating at me and I wanted to die.

Then I read the packet of my antidepressants to see what would happen if I took them all. Very ugly, painful, frightening and long-lasting and too like the pain and terror I have felt most of my life without the overdose. I just didn't see how more of the same would solve my suffering. And besides what about the kids. I put the packet back in the medicine box.

So it was back to "pull yourself together" again. And in my searches for something I could cope with I remembered last week's HUG mailing because it was about recovery. And I read some of it and I read some of the newsletter. And it all said, people feel so alone and their families and friends sometimes leave them or make things worse. It said you were going to talk about violence and mental health and spirituality and mental health later this year. It all made the me-eating voices stop and I don't feel like dying tonight. I have too many stories to tell and here maybe was someone who was interested and could help others to listen. I've always been convinced that is what would make me feel better and learn to cope better.

It said some professionals suffer from PTD (professional thought disorder) and that this was a tongue in cheek article. It asked readers to send responses. All of a sudden my GP's attitude and action didn't add to my need to die it was something others could help me to laugh at and they could hear how I knew the illness really exists.

It said that some of us are ashamed of our experience. This is my dairy for today telling you what I have to be ashamed of Me being me and not heard or seen. Tonight I see that is not my shame.

So, My name is Joanna and I think I suffer from depression and anxiety. These are very real and debilitating illnesses to me. I am very very good at taking control for short periods and certain roles and perform very well on these occasions. I fall to pieces when people do not support or have low expectations or opinions of me, including me. I often don't know how or who to trust and I often think there is no-one who trusts and values me. I get confused and angry and can't cope. I live in the unique situation that my employer is my one place that I am fully trusted and valued and supported. They even manage to hold me up when I stumble and want to give up. I would like a lot more help, outside work and believe I deserve it. I am proud of myself that I have chosen to step away from the influences in my life that have chosen to be mere voices that wish to determine for me how I feel and how I should best behave.

To me recovery is a process not a goal. I have been in recovery for 16 years since I found a twelve step programme that helped me with the effects of one of the issues I have met in my life. I was very happy and content for many years. This story is another of my steps in recovery; this time from everything that has led to, comes from and includes my self-hate that I could chose and dedicate my life to a man who wants to change me and who chooses violence and abuse to get that change.

Letter to the Editor

The government's plans to reclassify the drug called cannabis, taking it from a class c drug, to a class b drug, while at the same time not enforcing the law on its use sounds crazy to me, as well as being seen to be sending out the wrong message to cannabis users.

We know that there is a strong link between cannabis use and mental illness, so why has the government failed to do more to prevent its use among younger people, as well as vulnerable people?

To relax the law on this drug is an incredibly stupid move by the government; more should have been done to prevent the ease at which young people can gain easy access to such a drug, and less emphasis given on punishment for misuse of the drug.

If cannabis was made harder to get hold of in the first place, less people would be taking it and becoming mentally ill because of it.

More emphasis should be given on preventing the drug from finding itself on the streets of this country, hence the reason for the existence of the HM Customs & Excise people. These people catch these drug hauls coming into the country via people flying in from different parts of the world, and smuggling the stuff in through either airports, the shipping lanes, or by road via the channel tunnel.

But, since the government closed down most of the HM Customs & Excise places, or amalgamated some of them by combining some with other government departments, HM Customs & Excise have become less effective at catching drug smugglers, smuggling drugs into this country. This is the reason why more drugs have been able to find themselves on the streets of Britain.

What are your own comments and feelings on this subject and would you share them with me?

yours sincerely

Mr A.D. Goodwin

Concerned about gaining weight on your medication?

We know that for various reasons, such as increased appetite and/or thirst and feeling more lethargic, it is more difficult for those on certain commonly used psychiatric medications to control their weight.

In 2008 I set up a Group Programme, based on the Lily Healthy Living Pack, to help those in the Highland area with this situation. It's called the "Making Changes Group."

We know that at present there are 130 people on Clozapine in NHS Highland (excluding Argyll and Bute figures) and that at least 55% of people taking Clozapine gain 10% in weight. And this is only one of the relevant medications.

I was receiving approximately 2 referrals per month for the Dietetic Service to help people manage their weight on psychotropic medication of various types. Community Psychiatric Nurses, Physiotherapists and others were also seeing people individually. It seemed to make more sense to offer one package of treatment.

Three Groups were run in 2008: thirty five people confirmed attendance, with fourteen people completing all eight sessions of the Group. Others came to some of the sessions. Of the fourteen completing, nine lost weight and six had an improvement in their blood pressure. The Group is not only about weight loss and in fact "weight management" would be more accurate in that we want people to feel better about themselves in general. We were able to measure self-esteem in three of our attendees who completed all sessions and all three showed an improvement in their feelings about themselves. Evaluating the topics offered each week, for all sessions, participants said they learned something and most importantly, said the session would help them change their lifestyle behaviour. All also said that the sessions "mostly", "completely" or "exceeded" their "expectations." People attending have said that the help and support from others in the Group has been invaluable.

The Group at the moment is based in a community setting in Inverness e.g. Inverness Leisure (Aquadome); anyone willing to travel in is welcome. It is on weekly, for one hour per week and various staff give their expertise to help you e.g. physiotherapy, pharmacy, occupational therapy, community psychiatric nurse and dietician. You get a complete pack to take away and we encourage you to set small, achievable, realistic goals between sessions.

If you would like to come along, I do need a referral from a health professional such as your GP, nurse or Consultant Psychiatrist.

Ask them to contact Lorna Carroll, Specialist Dietician, based at New Craigs. I can be contacted on mobile 0781 8001759 or lorna.carroll@nhs.net.

There is a Group starting in August.

A leaflet about the Group is enclosed with this newsletter.

Service User Recovery Forum (SURF)

Graham and another HUG member regularly attend this meeting in London. At the meeting a group of service users and another of carers meet to discuss the activities and policies of the Royal College of Psychiatrists.

The meetings though a year on are still in their infancy and we are still getting to know each other but we can get issues put on the web page of SURF (as its is better known) and if any of you are interested there is a wide enetwork of members interested in the college that any user can apply to join. Phone Graham for an application pack.

HUG Round Table

As you know this is the HUG steering committee. It will meet three times between January and the end of March.

It has had a heavy burden recently with its time being taken up with planning for a management group for HUG, creating a HUG constitution, conflicts of interest policy and complaints policy. They may sound boring but we are hugely grateful to our HUG members who work on this group and keep these issues at the forefront of our minds.

Recently the Round Table had training in group work, elected Fiona as our representative on Highland Community Care Forum board of directors (our parent organisation) and reported on their own local issues.

We have vacancies for the round table in the following areas:

North west Sutherland
Sutherland
Nairn
Badenoch and strathspey
Wester ross
Argyll

If any of you are interested in applying to join and live in these areas do let us know.

Service Level Agreement

It may sound boring, but for a group like HUG to be funded it has to have an agreement with its funders over what it will do for the money it gets.

As part of Highland Community Care Forum we signed a contract that says what we will commit to doing for the next two and a half years (don't worry its more of the same with a little more on top for good measure.)

The down side is that we have to deliver now that we have signed but that's not too bad seeing as how we all want to deliver more than we can anyway. The good side is that not only is our speaking out work guaranteed for the next two so is around half of our anti stigma work which has never been funded locally before.

If any of you want to see our service level agreement do give us a call.

Mental Welfare Commission

There were recently proposals to combine the Mental Welfare Commission with other agencies, Graham and another HUG member went to Edinburgh to convey our anger to the minister that one of the few agencies charged with respecting and protecting our rights may disappear.

Since that meeting there has been a reprieve and there will now be a six month consultation period with key stakeholders on the commissions future.

If anyone wants to be kept up to date with this issue do let us know.

Mental Health Act Reference Group

The group reviewing the Mental Health Act is nearing the end of its work. Graham has spent a lot of time on this and is happy to let people know of its conclusions once it has reported to the First Minister.

Bus Passes

Over the last few months we have become aware that many of you have concerns over bus passes and the freedom that they give you to travel. Then there is the whole issue of getting around on a low income and with poor public transport.

When we start our local meetings again we would like to look at this subject so if you have any stories or ideas come along when the meetings happen.

Volunteers Needed

We are looking for volunteers....!

Sometimes we have mailouts to send out such as our reports or newsletters. At other times we run out of old reports and newsletters. When we do this we need people willing to come in to the office to stuff envelopes photocopy and so on.

We also occasionally have other admin tasks such as typing up creative writing pieces or other pieces of work that have been sent in to us. If you know your way around a computer then we would love to have the odd hours help with this.

You will all have seen our questionnaires which we use to check that we are involving people from all Highland communities and to see what people want to do with us. We need someone with computer skills and an understanding of confidentiality to enter this data onto a database for us.

If any of these tasks appeal to you do contact us at the office.

International Initiative in Mental Health Leadership

This initiative has been running for a number of years where key people from a number of countries meet up yearly and keep in contact to promote best practice and learning across the world.

This year the Scottish Government has sponsored six users to go to Australia as part of this program. We are delighted that three of them are members of HUG and look forward to seeing how they get on

VOX

VOX stands for 'Voices Of eXperience', in other words people like us.

It is the national user voice and has been doing great work in getting our voice heard on a number of forums at a national level.

Recently we met up with workers from VOX and had a wonderful afternoon working out all sorts of things including how regional groups such as us can feed into VOX and vice versa.

We hope that they grow and grow and help us gain a stronger and stronger voice.

HUG is a member of VOX but individuals can join too let us know if you want to and we'll tell you how.

A Library of Testimony

Over the years many of you have given us articles about your experiences; sometimes about living with mental health problems and at other times more specifically such as talking about things that have helped you such as the light box in this newsletter or about issues that are important to you such as spirituality.

We are now turning this collection of experience into a library of audio and written testimony.

If any of you wish to add to this by sending in your own testimony then please feel free to.

TALKS

Graham is giving talks on the principles of the Mental Health Act, user led research and welfare reform at conferences in the next few months.

They're all still in draft form but if you want to look at them and make comments on them before they are given feel free to contact him.

Are any of you in talkative mode? Give graham a call if you think you could deliver a good speech at a conference.

Comic Relief

We are delighted to say that we have received three years funding from Comic Relief for a series of arts and creative expression projects designed to increase awareness and reduce stigma.

Over the next three years we will be producing a series of DVD's, creating an animation project for young people, creating a drama written and performed by young people, holding an arts and mental health festival and doing creative writing and photography among other things. Ideas and thoughts about how we can make all these things come to life are welcome

And many thanks to Comic Relief you have opened our world up again.

Song appeal for Music Like a Vitamin

"Music is a higher revelation than all wisdom and philosophy. Music is the electrical soil in which the spirit lives, thinks and invents." *Ludwig van Beethoven*

The Scottish Mental Health Arts and Film Festival would like YOU to suggest songs that **inspire hope**. We are looking for songs that inspire, uplift, provoke thought and stir the heart; songs which have offered you hope and encouragement in moments of feeling down as well as songs that encourage self-empowerment.

The songs YOU suggest, from sad songs, to love songs, songs about relationships and life, songs to empower, anti-war songs and environment songs, will be collated by the Scottish Mental Health Arts and Film Festival along with some of Scotland's finest musicians. The collection of songs you suggest will be used to inform the Music like a Vitamin strand of the festival in October 2009, and will possibly be performed at one of the festival gigs. Here are some suggestions to stir your thoughts:

Lou Reed: Perfect Day

Bruce Springstein: I'm on Fire

Metallica: Nothing Else matters

Guns and Roses: Sweet Child O mine

Beatles: Hey Jude

Elvis: I Just Can't Help Believing

Please email your suggestions to mhfest@gmail.com naming song and artist or visit us at: www.mhfestival.com | www.myspace.com/artsandfilmfestival

Scottish Mental Health Arts and Film Festival (1 – 22 October 2009)

EVENTS

We have received requests for letting HUG members know about local and national events. Hopefully some of these will catch your eye!

Epilepsy: Psychological and Social Wellbeing

14 May 2009, Apex International Hotel, Edinburgh

Chaired by Dr Alan Carson, Consultant Neuropsychiatrist, Royal Edinburgh Hospital

This conference aims to examine the links between epilepsy and mental health; understand the needs of people with epilepsy in order to maintain good mental health and examine the service pathway for people with epilepsy and mental illness in Scotland. It's a full day event with some great speakers from neurology, psychiatry, neuropsychology, academia, nursing and the voluntary sector. There will be opportunity for discussion and debate, networking and learning. The delegate rate is £100. To register please call Epilepsy Scotland on 0141 427 4911 or visit our website and download a registration form.

Karen Taylor and Ron Coleman, Working to Recovery Limited

Making Recovery Happen , March 23rd - 27th,

2009 Credit Buster Seminars April 20th in Edinburgh / 21st in London with Dr Dirk Corstens on Making Sense of Voices.

tel 01851810060 www.workingtorecovery.co.uk

University of Glasgow: Division of Developmental Medicine

Mental Health Problems through the Lifespan

Wednesday 25 March 2009

The Teacher Building, Glasgow

Substance Abuse in Adults -

Understanding the Problems and Improving Treatment

Tuesday 21 April 2009

Hilton Glasgow

Children and Young People's Mental Health

Wednesday 13 May 2009

Glasgow Royal Concert Hall

Booking info: 0141 201 9353

Suzy Johnston—The Snow Globe Journals

At the age of 17 Suzy Johnston developed the initial symptoms of depression with the condition developing into manic depression/bipolar affective disorder whilst studying at St Andrews University.

After graduating, her deteriorating health saw her being hospitalised on 6 occasions with acute episodes of severe depression. Following her recovery, she first became involved in mental health awareness programmes in 1999 when she joined the Education Team of the Renfrewshire Association for Mental Health. Giving talks to senior secondary pupils, social workers etc and writing about having mental illness for student psychiatric nurses led to the writing of her autobiography 'The Naked Bird Watcher' which was first published in the Spring of 2003. 'To Walk on Eggshells' by Jean Johnston is the carer's account of Suzy's journey of recovery. This Spring sees Suzy publish 'The Snow Globe Journals' - a more probing and searching account of Suzy's battles with mental illness. Suzy shares with us some of her thoughts on sharing personal experiences.

When I wrote *The Naked Bird Watcher* little did I know what it would bring!

I was taken aback at the amount of interest, support and praise it received so that was reassuring in that it wasn't that bad. You have NO idea how stressful and worrying it is when you write about yourself and go 'public' outwith the mental health arena. Mental health folk get it – the general public might not. Anyway – it was to be okay – in fact, more than that which was terrific and it has helped to change some people's ideas. As I am also a musician I recorded a CD *Walk in my Shoes* also about managing mental illness, self-harm and life generally.

Certainly people immediately assume that if you write about your illness it will be a cathartic experience – like you are going to be instantly ok. That isn't the case. I didn't feel a huge sense of relief when I wrote *The Naked Bird Watcher* – and I think if you are considering writing about your own experiences you really need to be in a good place mentally before you do it. Resurrecting bad events and times can trigger relapses so be careful. What I did find beneficial and cathartic was that when I read my book a few years later I realized just how very ill I had been and how much I had progressed since then – that in itself was very cathartic. Reading mum's account of her experience in her book *To Walk on Eggshells* also gave me a better insight into the whole condition and the effects that it has on everyone. Her book highlighted how important the role of the carer, family and friends are.

It was reading over my first book that took me back to those terrible times and I realised just how bad these times had been and that I was now strong enough to face up to the tougher aspects which I had shied away from in the first book. So I sat down and wrote *The Snow Globe Journals* which gives a deeper insight and far more graphic detail into the mental distress of psychosis, depression, hallucinations, self-harm and managing the recovery. It is my hope that by writing this others facing the same torment as I did will feel less alone, frightened and isolated. And hopefully family, friends and the medical profession will gain some idea of just how bad mental illness really is. But most important of all I want it to offer hope.

The Naked Bird Watcher by Suzy Johnston, ISBN 0954809203
The Snow Globe Journals by Suzy Johnston, ISBN 978954809225
To Walk on Eggshells by Jean Johnston, ISBN 0954809211

Available from bookshops and at a discount price with free postage from www.thecairn.com

In Care Survivors Service Scotland

ENCOURAGING A CULTURE OF HOPE AND RECOVERY

by working towards an Integrated and Co-ordinated Service Response

The In care Survivors Service Scotland is being developed to highlight and address the long term effects, as well as current and future needs of those survivors subjected to neglect, physical, emotional and sexual abuse whilst in care.

In February 2008, the parliamentary statement also set out the progress being made by the Scottish Government to improve the support that is available for survivors of in care and institutional abuse, and re-emphasised a collective determination to work closely with its partners to achieve real change.

By 'In Care', is meant *any* residential care setting, be it local authority children's homes, approved schools, hospital care, kinship care, respite care, those run by charitable organisations, religious orders and foster care placements. By Institutional, we mean organised through institutions, such as religious orders, churches or other charitable organisations.

This development came from the National Strategy for Adult Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse with recommendations stating that the underpinning aspiration was that, "Individuals could be supported to move on in their lives so that they would be able to enjoy the same benefits as other citizens such as meaningful relationships and employment."

For further information see www.survivorscotland.org.uk.

Open Secret based in the Forth Valley is an independent, specialist resource operating from a Community Development perspective. As the lead agency with Kingdom Abuse Survivors Project (KASP) as the main partner the service consists of:

- A hub of specialist development workers able to link up with local services across Scotland to offer survivors and their families support, advocacy and confidential counselling.
- A national confidential telephone support line – **0800 121 6027** – providing support, guidance and advocacy to those over age 16, who suffered abuse. It also offers support to families.
The helpline is currently being operated from 9.00am to 5.00pm weekdays and these hours may be extended over time.
- A new website and leaflet campaign highlighting the support available will be set up in the coming months.
- Help for survivors to access the Criminal Injuries Compensation scheme and other legal services.

There are development workers in place in Highland, Aberdeen, Ayrshire, Dundee, Fife, Edinburgh and the Borders. I would therefore like to take this opportunity to introduce myself as the development worker for Highlands.

As a development worker employed by Open Secret, initially within the Lochaber area my main aim is of multi agency working to develop an integrated and co-ordinated service response so encouraging a culture of hope and recovery.

As a member of the British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy I can offer confidential therapeutic counselling, advocacy and training.

If you would like to make a referral you can contact me at In Care Survivors Scotland on **07590350862**. Alternatively, survivors can refer themselves either on this number or via the confidential helpline.

Some of the Main Duties & Responsibilities of this service:

- To network and liaise with statutory, voluntary and community organisations and groups in the area of work
- To develop joint work with other statutory or voluntary sector workers
- To raise awareness of issues and provide training for statutory, voluntary and community groups.
- To provide direct support to survivors who have experienced abuse in care (1:1 face to face, telephone and group-work)
- To provide support and advocacy to service users on accessing case records or any required issue.
- To assist service users with Criminal Injuries Compensation claims
- To support initiatives by independent groups of survivors
- To develop resources for service users.
- To contribute to the development, evaluation and review of services within In Care Survivors Service Scotland and Open Secret (KASP)

If you have any questions please feel free to give me a call on: **07590350862** or email me: Peggytaylor38@yahoo.co.uk / Peggy@opensecret.org

Peggy Taylor
Development Worker

The Guardian Charity Awards

The fifth of December was a momentous occasion in my life, for not only was it the date when I first fell into this world, but it was also the very day in 2007 when I had the privilege to travel to London to pick up a prestigious award.... Let me tell you a little about it.

Each year The Guardian Charity Awards seeks to recognize and encourage small and medium size charities throughout the country for the contribution their valuable work makes towards social welfare in the community. Last year, the fifteenth of such awards, Caithness Mental Health Support Group entered the competition and amazingly won through from 6 hundred contenders to be part of the final five winners. No mean task, I'm sure you'll agree.

The Trip.. We set out from Wick at 9a.m. on a seasonally apt December morning, with snow flurry's surrounding us on all sides and an apprehension of how conditions might be further down the road. But the sun was shining and stayed with us through Latheron, Dunbeath, Berriedale, but round about Brora, dark clouds were forming, following us heavy in the sky, blocking out the sun before finally slamming it's cargo of rain into us from the West. The conversation with my travelling companions up to this point had been convivial, but now took on a more subdued tone as the car was thrashed with the driving rain. Any worries we may have harboured were safely allayed by the expertise of Tom's driving, managing to get us to Inverness Airport in time to catch an afternoon cuppa and cookie before checking in for our flight to London.

Once on board the plane, following the customary safety guidelines by the cabin crew I clunk clicked my belt. Moments later as we cruised along the runway, then lifting off into that grey northern sky I momentarily had the feeling that I may die. With the worst part over and now reaching a good height I picked up a familiar book I had taken with me for some light reading on the the journey. I almost burst out laughing as I read the title "Tragically I Was An Only Twin" The Complete Peter Cook. Comedy has the propensity to get us through everything.

Apart from a little turbulence due to weather, it had been an otherwise ordinary trouble free flight, once safely on the ground at Gatwick at 6.45pm I announced to Tom and Garry "that is the highest I've ever been on my birthday". With great surprise Tom replied "if we had known, we would have bought you a celebratory glass of wine on the plane", however, that would have to wait and with haste we immediately made our way to the centre of the hugely busy airport concourse to pick up our directions for the bus stop we needed to be at for our connection to the Russ Hill Hotel where we were booked in for the night.

Traversing our way through the pedestrian traffic I was immediately taken over by the pace of everything, and was instantly reminded of my own past city living, sending me an excited buzz. The vivid colours of this mass movement of souls searching for signs, that small but vital piece of information that would point them in the right direction. Escalators going up, escalators coming down, moving walkways, staircases, lifts, so many lost souls looking for exits. Following several aborted efforts we eventually got our bearings and headed back inside for a lovely evening meal at what I seem to remember being a Wetherspoons house. Fed and watered, the celebratory birthday drink included, we resumed our way to the bus stance.

We checked into the Russ Hill Hotel around 9.45pm, and even at that time it appeared very busy. After dis-carding our luggage in our rooms and a quick freshen up, we met back in the lounge bar for some supper refreshments. It had been a long day, and following a run over of the mornings schedule Tom and Garry retired earlier to bed, leaving me with another birthday drink and the opportunity to contemplate the wonderful reasons why I was there, in that place, at that time, on this my 56th birthday.

The Big Day..... Hazy sunshine greeted us in the morning and still a reminder of yesterdays snow hanging around trees, hedgerows and fields surrounding the hotel, situated in the Charlwood area of Surrey. We assembled at the front door, along with about another thirty people who were waiting for a courtesy coach to take us to catch the Gatwick Express to London Victoria, then a taxi to the Tate Modern where the presentation ceremony was being held.

In the Starr Auditorium in charge of the presentation proceedings was David Brindle, public services editor with the Guardian, who gave the opening address, followed by the introduction of the five different winners by way of video film footage on the big screen. It was so interesting to hear and see the stories of each particular centre, all of whom do such valuable work in their own communities, and fully deserving to be winners. The keynote speech was given by Baroness Howarth of Breckland (Valerie Howarth) who is deputy chair of the Children and Families Courts Advisory Services. She is also secretary to the All Parliamentary Children's Group. Incidentally, two other posts she has held in her illustrious career of Care have been as founder member and first chair of the Telephone Helplines Association, founder of the King's Cross Homelessness Project and London Homelessness Forum.

I must say that the treatment we received throughout the day was first class, from the welcoming reception, the presentation itself where we felt like film stars, (well we were in the Starr Auditorium after all), right up to the lunch served on the Seventh Floor Restaurant. Oh! and did I mention that we were joined by our local representative in Parliament, M.P. John Thurso. The staff from both the Guardian and the Tate Modern were pleasant, courteous and friendly, and couldn't do enough for us.

The only disappointment I had was that being an artist I didn't have the opportunity to explore the Gallery as we were running to such a tight schedule, but what we did get a look at as we entered the building on the Turbine Hall was a subterranean sculptural work by Columbian artist Doris Salcedo called Shibboleth, it is the first work to intervene with the very fabric of the building itself. Dramatically breaking open the floor and dividing the space in two. Running the entire length of the building it begins as a hairline crack at the west entrance to the Turbine Hall, gradually widens and deepens as it runs 167 metres to the far end. It became affectionately known by observers as the 'Crack', as I followed it along it's winding path I couldn't help but think humorously about it, like "when are the Wimpey boys going to come and fill it up", or "they must have run out of cement here". The work off course like so much modern art is open to interpretation, but it is supposed to raise questions about the historic and current divisions in society. Wire mesh, the most common means of control used to define borders and divisions, is embedded within the exposed opening.

Later on the plane back home I contemplated the 'Crack' again and realized it could work in many different contexts, like for instance as the Irish say 'enjoying the Craick' or more significantly in this case, the different derogatory terms applied to people with mental health issues, e.g.; 'cracked up', 'crackpot', 'crackers' etc.. Such expressions stem off course from ignorance, and I certainly believe that with the invaluable work being done throughout the country by the likes of those winners at this years Guardian Charity Awards, we are building stronger foundations and bringing people a little closer to an understanding of how we all really tick.

It was a tremendous privilege to be asked to represent the Caithness Mental Health Support Group at the Guardian Awards Ceremony in London, along with my very fine travelling companions, Gary Robertson and Tom MacLennan, bringing back for the benefit of both The Haven, Wick and Stepping Stones, Thurso, a cheque for 6,000 pounds, a brand new computer and a beautiful plaque.

There is another meaning that has become associated with the 'crack' and indeed the plaque that we brought back, but that's another story and one I may save for another time.

John McLeod

And the beat goes on...

I would like to share how being a part of HUG has helped me move forward in my life. Considering I discovered HUG when my life was at a standstill this has been quite 'a moving experience'.

It doesn't matter so much really why I took my breakdown when I did in 2002 - breakdowns happen to lots of different people from lots of different backgrounds. What does matter is how discovery of organisations like HUG can change a once broken Soul and help piece the sometimes unrecognisable broken shards back together - if not to the way they were - then to something resembling it - and in the best - scenario (what happened to me) to something better.

Stronger.

True strength cannot be measured simply in terms of flesh, muscle and bone.

True strength is more complex - mind - body - spirit.

When my mind 'broke' - alas body and spirit broke with it. I felt numb and paralysed everywhere in me. Non human. Nothing meant nothing in every sense. I thought often about suicide at the time - but discarded the thought because I knew I didn't want to die - I just wanted what had broken me to go away and stop hurting me also - I didn't want to hurt my Being anymore. Situations/people/me - had already done quite a good job of that in the past - I didn't want to be part of that use/abuse anymore.

At the time of my breakdown, I ended up in hospital, but even there after waiting 3 days to see 'the Head Doctor' I was classed as a homeless case, not a psychiatric one. I'm a lifelong voice hearer and was suddenly faced with a memory of my nephew - also a voice hearer being forcefully locked up in a psychiatric day unit and given trial/error doses of some drug or other which reduced him to a trembling zombie. My voices were upset and concerned. I said nothing to anyone about being a voice hearer. I ate my 3 meals a day, kept myself to myself and two weeks later got out. It felt terribly wrong, hiding my voice hearing, like I was a clever criminal or something, pulling the wool over the eyes of the Psychiatric 'police'.

What crime had I committed though? I asked myself. 'Being human?'

So when I came out of hospital, it should have been a relief to me but it wasn't. My homelessness to that Doctor was purely physical - bricks and mortar etc - but to me - my *real* homelessness was an eviction from my Soul and what felt like a very narrow escape from losing the freedom of my mind and body.

Where do you go from that?

I was granted a Council flat after 2 weeks at hospital, but it meant little to me. I could've been housed in a ditch for all I cared. I knew this sense of eviction from my Soul was bad. Even death meant nothing to me. I felt I would still feel nothing - which is a horrid place to be because to feel nothing except that awfulness of the awareness of feeling nothing - there are no words to describe it - to each his/her own way - and to be able to still feel that eternally ... after death if I followed through on my suicidal feelings was unthinkable ...

Ironically, it was my voices that helped me through this dark time.

They like to be creative - and have always prompted me to follow in this direction.

Before my breakdown I had endeavoured to create my own business in arts and crafts. Making bead jewellery, clay crafts etc. I turned to this again. When I couldn't sleep I would sit up through the night stringing bracelets and necklaces etc. Before too long they piled up and piled up ...

I started to think about my earlier desire to make and sell my beads but wasn't prepared for the shock of having attended all the local business start up seminars - to be stopped in my tracks by the Department of Work and Pensions, who informed me that it wasn't the selling of my beads that concerned them but the making of them. I downed all beads and any self esteem scraped thus far.

Than one night at our User Centre there was a Burns night and a small ceilidh. A local band came and I was drawn to the drummer. 'Yeh, I was thinking - I could bang out a few heavy drumbeats - get all this frustration out of my system!) I had a vision of me seated outside a Glencoe cave - my hair wild - wearing a long raggy baggy dress - banging a drum - my heartfelt woe filled wails echoing across the glens! I could even charge tourists money to see a genuine Scottish Banshee!' The vision made me smile. A real heartfelt smile. My first in a very long time.

Plucking up courage I approached the drummer in the ceilidh band and found out from him that one of the other musicians worked at the local College. He let me try the drums - I was hooked. Something in me rekindled - one of the broken shards of my lost Soul, now rounded by the stormy ocean currents of the past year and a half settled in my heart.

Instinct took over - somehow like when a Caterpillar without understanding how suddenly realises it's time to follow such inner instincts - don't question it -

to cut a long story short I did speak to the College music man - and he invited me to attend his weekly Traditional Scottish Music class, and there I found a Bodhran Drum

and found it as natural as breath. I bought my own and it became a symbol of survival to me. I also started to teach myself the penny whistle - but gave that up after awhile because I couldn't read music. I was told I was a natural musician but it bothered me I didn't understand what I was naturally playing! I dabbled in composing but felt helpless to write the notes out. Nevertheless, through the speaking out venues with HUG where I was free to explain and feel accepted as a voice hearer externally - internally - I could sense my Soul working hard to relocate its broken Self. This went on for some time. This awareness was a mysterious unfolding to me at the time - I never dwelt too long on it in fear of it suddenly spiriting away!

I took my weekly music class at College seriously, making my way there every week it was like going on a pilgrimage to some shrine where I felt if I attended it faithfully, somehow, somewhere, sometime I would re-find me.

Somewhere in the midst of this re-wakening of my Self - at my local User Centre sometimes - these Meetings would take place by HUG. I had no idea what they were or what HUG did, but one day I decided to attend one of the Meetings. Graham opened it up for input. I was more traumatised than I thought and crumbled. It was difficult to speak out in front of people knowing you were in danger of falling apart at the seams, but something in the way HUG handled this - their gentleness - almost as if they knew that I had all these broken sharp edged mismatched shards inside and they didn't want to dislodge them or affect them in any way which might cause me more pain than I was already in.

It's hard to put into words but that's how I saw them then, and what I learned from them in time to be careful about - with other hurting human beings. That's a tough lesson, for when you're hurting, you're only aware at that time of your own pain, your own delicate nerve centre, it takes time and space to develop awareness of others who hurt around you. Some hurting Souls don't want anyone can't bear to have anyone near them at all, even just sitting quietly near them, their pain is just too raw. And sometimes its scary to reach out for fear of rejection - that same rejection you yourself are feeling or have felt.

And it's not only these delicate Souls HUG reaches to educate that what you see isn't always what is there - HUG reaches out to everyone they can touch to educate that what you see isn't always what is there. Some of these people work up and down the length of the Global/Community Establishment Ladder. In the Arts, in Education, the Mental Health / Social System etc. If someone were to ask me to suggest a word to describe what HUG is all about - I'd have to say Awareness. They are so aware of everything, and what they're not aware of they strive to learn about and teach awareness of. I'm so thankful to be part of the HUG experience of awareness and expression.

And thanks to HUG it was in the Arts I found my longed for freedom to express.

A possession that above all other possessions I had lost at the time of my breakdown I valued and needed most.

I'm not sure how it all began ... that word awareness I suppose ... through the mists of fear and pain I became aware of HUG.

At first it was attending HUG Meetings here at my local User Centre. Then I dared myself to try to attend one of the HUG Meetings at HUG HQ. This evolved to joining the HUG Round Table and their Meetings, and in between these Meetings Graham invited me to speak out at various venues to share what it's like to be a voice hearer.

At these times, I never felt it did much in the way of educating people about voice hearing, even when the venues seemed a great success, yet, always I was bowled over by the courage and fortitude of my HUG peers also speaking out. I've never had many role models in my chequered life, but my HUG peers stand tall among the few. Through their closeness to pain, they all knew how I felt, and it took time for me to see that. I sensed it before I saw it. From that sensing, that awareness, I began to accept it.

It was a very special gift from them to me - *only valuable when passed on to others.*

Meantime, back to the music (I do digress! Now that HUG helped me find my speak out voice again - no one can shut me up - even when I write!)

But that's another story from my Music one - when HUG introduced some amazing Creative Writing sessions enabling interested HUG Members to try writing as a tool for Self Expression.)

I'd been attending my weekly Bodhran Class at College for almost two years when I happened to find a College brochure advertising a new NC Music and Performance Course. Before I knew it I applied and was offered to my shock surprise an interview then audition. A week later, I was informed I had been accepted. I could hardly believe it. It really was just like a dream. I didn't want to wake up. It was so far removed from anything I'd experienced in the past four years, everything from self harm, suicide intent, awful hidden depressions and oppressions, and a terrible horror of maybe never being able to move forward to the slightest hint of recovery or at the least, as near to recovery as I could hope to reach.

Sometimes when self doubt hit hard, the mailman would arrive with the latest HUG Report etc and I'd re-find my inner feet - my voices always seemed to know when the mailman was due! Always I was helped by these HUG mailings - though I never said. This is an area I still have to work on, the acknowledgement of all HUG does to help keep their Members informed of all that's happening within and around HUG and so help us to move on - at our own pace.

So now I'm at the pinnacle of my letter here. I started my Music and Performance Course six months ago in September. I have never ever stayed at anything for six months and the Course will run two years. My Classes consist of Vocals: Drums: Keyboard: Music Theory and Group Work (singing with a band). It has changed my life to better than it was before. eg Growing up discalculate - numbers/co-ordination a nightmare causing me to frequently truant school - never in a million years would I have dreamed it possible to read a music sheet that once looked to me just a like a page of black blobs and lines as easily as I could read a book. There's an amazing Dyslexia tutor who helps me find ways to get around my problems with discalculate - and that overflows into my daily life - eg shopping.

And in May I'll be singing lead vocals in a band made up from our Music Class - (thanks to the HUG speaking out venues - I have the confidence to face that!)

The HUG venues - the get togethers such as the creative writing afternoons started last year - this constant encouragement to move forward even if you can only manage it in your mind at first - it all seems to happen without realising it's all happening. Writing/reading out/listening to others' writings ... this freedom to freely express ...

Every day I make my way to College and sometimes it feels like any moment I'll wake up and still be back at the hospital wondering what hit me or still homeless and lost.

It's a relief to realise these thoughts are only fleeting flashbacks but they're still there - a constant reminder to me of just how far I have travelled the past few years.

The thing is, I owe so much of the extraordinary metamorphoses I've passed through during that journey to HUG and they haven't left me yet, even though with all the topsy turvy schedules I keep with College - I did subconsciously let go of HUG. When I started the Music Course I was scared I'd not be able to handle it - that if I made a big thing of it then fell flat on my face - well - I couldn't have handled that - nor have faced anyone again. I found myself pacing myself one day/one week week at College - two days/two weeks at College - three days/three weeks - four days/four weeks and so forth until it was no longer days and weeks but months. It'll soon be going on for seven ... I've only just gotten back in touch with HUG re being an active Member because I felt I could finally say - 'I've tried to move forward and it worked!'

And still HUG is there - still encouraging - still teaching me that it's okay to reach for happiness and fulfilment of self expression in all its forms - even silence.

(I must admit when I'm banging away at the drum kit in the Class 'live room' silence is a billion miles away! But sometimes - it does return to visit me - and it's at these times I take a deep breath and pinch myself to make sure it's all not just a dream? No, it's all real right enough!

That's the amazing reality of HUG - that in the heart of all (who or this or that) that struggles to survive within the often bruised and battered Body of Mental Health *throughout* the external/ internal layers of its ever sensitive skin - HUG has its long reaching fingers pressed gently but firmly on that Body's Pulse of Life

and so the beat goes on ...'

Elizabeth Murray Brown

12th European Symposium Suicide and Suicidal Behavior

The last week of August 2008 saw me in Glasgow for the 12th European Symposium Suicide and Suicidal Behaviour. I'd had known about this for several months, due to my involvement as a STORM trainer. I'm not sure that my attempt to devise a poster exhibition for the conference whilst still on a section in New Craigs in April was seen as appropriate to my recovery at the time. However, it gave me something to aim for which I felt strongly about, and I think that really matters and helps. Through Jackie Agnew I applied for the resources to attend from the Endowments fund, and that was successful, with the proviso that I gave some feedback. That was a further very positive boost to my confidence and helped me feel worthwhile again.

The conference was opened by Geoff Huggins, the head of mental health division of the Scottish Government. He made reference to Choose Life and additional staff training in assessment, awareness and prevention to help meet the targets in completed suicides reduction. We rapidly moved on to presentations on challenges in developing effective suicide prevention strategies; personality and suicide risk; genes and childhood experiences. Looking back at my notes from these inputs, they were fascinating and delivered by researchers from Canada, Scotland and USA.

There were 570 delegates at the symposium and I knew in advance I would know one, Gill, who had delivered the STORM training several years previously. We eventually met up during the first evening. With her researcher, we joined a group of Scottish delegates for some lively debate on the varying merits of different suicide awareness and prevention programmes available, mainly Mental Health First Aid, ASIST and STORM.

The packed programme comprised large scale presentations and smaller parallel sessions. With so much to choose from I elected to attend those I thought I would understand (at least partly). Despite the title, the delegates were not exclusively from Europe. There were some very memorable inputs. One was a moving tribute to, and appreciation of, the work of Dr Andrej Marusic, a leading Slovenian psychiatrist and psychologist who had died earlier in the year. One aspect of his work on youth suicide focused on alcohol and drugs as a risk factor for suicide in adolescents.

"The mourning after" highlighted poor research into how to support those bereaved by suicide. This is something which will be very close to the hearts of many of us, and there have been times when our HUG network has been able to give some comfort. Apart from hearing about work which I was new to me, Breathing Space ran a session outlining their history and future plans to be accessible to a wider section of the population, including those with hearing impairments.

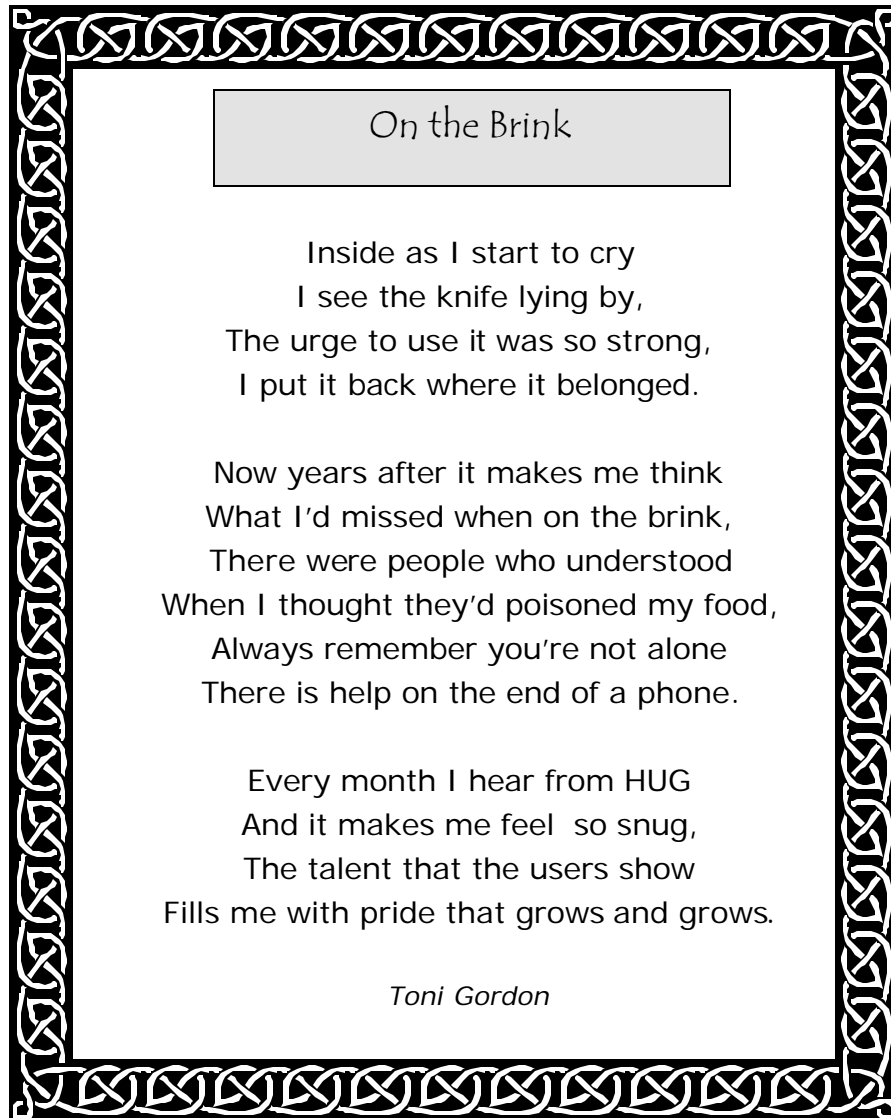
In addition to the formal inputs, there were poster displays featuring work demonstrating a wide range of developments and research into the field. There were resources available and useful contact details. I still have to finish the two books I was given – one written by the

father of a young Belgian girl who ended her life by suicide; the other relating to a suicide in Cornton Vale prison.

The conference ended with a lively and colourful presentation as a bid for the next one to be held in Rome in 2010. This proposal was accepted. I did text Graham to suggest that it would be worthwhile (I thought!) for someone from HUG to participate if funding could be found. My timing on that one was poor, but we will see what happens.

A photographic record was kept of the whole event, with over 600 pictures now on Flickr.

Chris Evans



Scotland: A model for mental health in Europe

In the context of a European project on Mental Health, a new documentary is going to be developed during this winter and next spring. The documentary is one of the outcomes of a European project called “Mental Health: Trained Today To Train Tomorrow”, which is financed by the European Commission and was born as a result of a partnership among several organisations from all over Europe:

- Scotland (UK): HUG
- Catalonia (Spain): ADEMM, JOIA, Spora
- Romania: Estuar (Coordinators of the project), Aripa, Opportunities, Institute for Educational Sciences
- Poland: Association for Child and Family Mental Health, Open Mind
- Portugal: Persona

The aim of the project is to train people (both users and professionals of mental health services) from these different countries in order to promote the set-up and development of users organisations in these places. In order to do this, the trainees have been learning training skills in this issue from different members of the European partnership: Opportunities (how to become a trainer), Spora (what’s the role of Empowerment and Leadership in Mental Health) and HUG (how to set-up and develop users organisations).

The project got its inspiration from Scotland, where users organisations have a fundamental role in the Mental Health policies, and in the development of a better place to live for those who suffer from a mental health problem.

After several weeks of training sessions led in Bucharest (Romania), Rzeszów (Poland), Barcelona (Catalonia) and Barreiro (Portugal), the different trainees have already become trainers, and now they have started to train users and professionals of the mental health services of their countries, both to understand what Empowerment is and to promote the creation of new users organisations.

There we go!

But this is not all that this project is about. Another one of the project outcomes is the development of an audiovisual report, as a main responsibility of Spora's professional team.

This film will show what the project is about while explaining what Empowerment means in the Mental Health field. In order to do that, the members of Spora are traveling to Scotland, so they can interview and film mental health users, professionals and policy makers all around the Scottish territory.

We must say that the role of the Highland Users Group (HUG) in the coordination of this project is essential. Scotland, through the amazing energy and know-how of HUG members, has become an inspiration for the rest of the European partners of this project, who have been working together with them for the last four years.

Now we want to make up an audiovisual report that can explain how different things can be in the mental health field, how new things are being done all over Europe. We want to show that we have a model to take as reference (with its good and bad aspects), a model in which mental health users have a main role in their therapeutic process, in their relationship with society and in the design of a mental health policy that aims for a better well-being for all... a model settled in Scotland

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Barcelona.

Calling all clubs and societies

Highland Libraries are compiling a database containing contact information for groups, clubs and societies across the Highlands.

Much of the information is already available in a range of websites, local publications, databases and card indexes but the **High Societies** project will bring together on-line for the very first time essential contact information about community life in the Highlands, in an accessible, and easily searchable format.

Clubs, groups and organisations featured on the **High Societies** website will be easily found by members of their local community and those interested in their activities.

To be among the first listed on **High Societies**, you can obtain an entry form from your local library or service point. Once the database is launched all groups wishing to be included will be able to enter their details on-line from the start at www.high-societies.org and manage their own entries. They can upload images of their activities and promote events they are organising for free.

For more information contact your local library
or email: libraries@highland.gov.uk

Smoke Free Consultation

The Scottish Government are running a smoke free mental health services consultation till **Monday 6 April**.

They are particularly looking for views from service users with mental health problems and employees who work in psychiatric hospitals and units.

You can find the consultation on the website Smoke Free Mental Health Services Consultation or for hard copies you can e-mail Lee-Anne.Smith@scotland.gsi.gov.uk or write to her at Scottish Government, Public Health & Substance Misuse Division, Tobacco Control, Area 3 EN, St Andrew's House, Regent Road, Edinburgh EH1 3DG.