



HOMELESSNESS AND MENTAL HEALTH

(AN ACCOUNT OF SOME OF THE MAIN ISSUES WE FACE)

January 2011



**HUG at
Highland Community Care Forum**

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WHAT IS HUG?

HUG (Action for Mental Health) is a network of people who have experience of mental health problems.

At present winter 2010, HUG has approximately 400 members and 14 branches across the Highlands. HUG has been in existence now for 14 years. Between them, members of HUG have experience of nearly all the mental health services in the Highlands.

HUG wants people with mental health problems to live without discrimination and to be equal partners in their communities. They should be respected for their diversity and who they are.

We should:

- Be proud of who we are.
- Be valued.
- Not be feared.
- Live lives free from harassment.
- Live the lives we choose.
- Be accepted by friends and loved ones.
- Not be ashamed of what we have experienced.

We hope to achieve this by:

- Speaking out about the services we need and the lives we want to lead.
- Challenging stigma and raising awareness and understanding of mental health issues.

HUG's aims are as follows:

- To be the voice of people in Highland who have experienced mental health problems.
- To promote the interests of people in Highland who use or have used mental health services.
- To eliminate stigma and discrimination against people with mental health problems.
- To promote equality of opportunity for people with mental health problems irrespective of creed, sexuality, gender, race or disability.
- To improve understanding about the lives of people with mental health problems.
- To participate in the planning, development and management of services for users at a local, Highland and national level.

- To identify gaps in services and to campaign to have them filled.
- To find ways of improving the lives, services and treatments of people with mental health problems.
- To share information and news on mental health issues among mental health service user groups and interested parties.
- To increase knowledge about resources, treatments and rights for users.
- To promote cooperation between agencies concerned with mental health.

INTRODUCTION

It is widely known that many people who have mental health problems experience homelessness and that homelessness can itself cause mental health problems.

Over the years we have touched on the subject in HUG but have never explored it in any depth as we didn't believe that it was an area of life that a lot of our members had experienced and would be able to speak about.

However, in recent months, we discovered that many of us who attend the regular HUG Friday Forum meetings in Inverness had been through this experience, both very recently and in the distant past and have been profoundly affected by it.

HUG has also adopted a Diversity Policy so that we can ensure that the views expressed in HUG demonstrate the views of people from a wide variety of backgrounds whether they represent a widely held experience or not.

It therefore seemed appropriate to hold a meeting on the subject with people who have been through homelessness.

On this occasion we did not seek to travel around our branches, although in the future we might do, instead we focussed on a small number of people with direct experience of homelessness and mental illness.

This report is designed to give a snapshot into people's experiences and views. It concentrates mainly on Inverness, East Ross and Skye instead of the whole of the Highlands. Because it comes from a small group of people we cannot claim that it represents widely held views or experiences but we do believe that it will shed some light on the experience of people with a mental illness who have been homeless.

WHAT IS HOMELESSNESS LIKE?

Becoming homeless is a huge event in our lives and almost always causes the problems that we already have to become greater and more difficult to cope with.

The main themes we talked about were an overwhelming experience of desolation and isolation.

We talked about how it felt as though we had reached the 'bottom of the ladder' and that this gave us a profound feeling of hopelessness.

WHAT ARE THE CAUSES OF HOMELESSNESS?

The view of our members was that there were many causes of homelessness but that the main causes were:

- Relationship breakdown
- Mental health problems
- Addiction
- Debt

EXPERIENCES OF HOMELESSNESS

The following are accounts from some of our members of what they went through:

'JAMES'

"I went to the Salvation Army in Bristol. I never used the bath there because it was too filthy. I never mixed, because of different people with very different problems and backgrounds. There were people taking drugs, and people with a mental illness were picked on and taken advantage of. People robbed you and took advantage of you. We slept with our shoes on because they would have been stolen if we didn't."

'SUSAN'

"I was homeless ten years ago. I ran away to Inverness from a violent relationship.

I went to the Council with my 4 year old twins. I was immediately put in a bed and breakfast. I stayed in 6 bed and breakfasts over the next few months.

The Landlords were paid very well to accommodate me in one room with the twins. On some occasions the rooms were that dirty that you didn't want to stay in them. You had to go out all day.

Having to trail from bed and breakfast to bed and breakfast was a dreadful experience; going up the street with your bags and children. You get robbed and everything by other homeless people.

I was guaranteed my own accommodation in the future but I had to wait some months for this. Later, I was put in a homeless unit where there were many people with different social problems. I was there for three months with no access to a fridge or cooker. The accommodation was fine but the fellow residents made it feel very dangerous. I felt isolated; I couldn't work or do anything.

I don't regret doing it as it meant that I got away from a life that I wanted to get away from. In the end I ended up in a nice bed and breakfast and it turned into a good experience. But it is very bad for your children.

Now I hear that they can't put you out in the daytime which is good."

'MARY'

"I became homeless when I lost my job and house due to mental illness.

I didn't have to lose it, but I got into a critical situation where I said "Shove your job, I'm resigning", when, if I'd waited, I would have got medical retirement on 80% of my salary.

I ended up at my parents. I was too ill to live with them, and we couldn't cope with each other.

The Council Homeless Point people were very good. They could have sent me to the "Royal", but at the time it had a very bad reputation, so they sent me to a better bed and breakfast at Muir of Ord. It was good; it was smaller and not exclusively for the homeless. It was clean.

Then it was a matter of just waiting until I got accommodation. I only had to wait 4 months."

'ALISTAIR'

"I finished college and had nowhere to stay. I ended up in a bed and breakfast. I got depressed; I didn't know I was bi-polar then.

It was one of the worst experiences of my life. I was OK because I knew that I would get a job soon. I was lucky; I got out in time to good accommodation.

You have a small room; no one speaks to you. There is a one bar fire. There is nowhere to eat. You don't know what the other residents are like and you can't manage on your money. Everything is expensive. I got out quickly which was very lucky."

'MARK'

"I suffered a bereavement. I lost my wife and stopped caring about anything. It was my fault I became homeless.

I drifted from caring person to caring person who would put me up. But I didn't care so I would go away again. Originally I didn't really care, I never thought of living in a house again, I just slept rough. I got back in to society due to the help of a girl who befriended me.

It was some time ago that I was homeless. At that time the Salvation Army used to give you soup but they didn't speak to you or try to help you. I used to give them money before I was homeless but I haven't done so since.

On the weekends, volunteers from the churches came round; they were really good, they spoke to you and gave you clothes. In those years there was only the soup kitchen and the library was the only place you could go to in the day time.

Now I try to make the most of what's available. I do quite well and am quite content with life. When you have had nothing you can be very appreciative of what you have. Even just being able to have friends again.

Before, when nothing had gone wrong, I worried about everything, now I don't worry. Once you have been in the locked wards and in prison you stop worrying."

THE FACILITIES WE USE

BED AND BREAKFAST ACCOMMODATION

This is variable in its quality. There are some good facilities and some very positive, knowledgeable and helpful landlords but there are negatives too and that makes life very hard to cope with:

- It is very isolating. We tend to stay in our own rooms and may be worried and suspicious of our fellow residents. Many of us can become very lonely.
- We can't take electrical appliances to our rooms for cooking and often rely on breakfast, expensive ready-meals from the microwave or unhealthy carry outs. We can become accustomed to a diet of sandwiches and pot noodles and struggle to afford healthy nutritious or pleasant food to eat. Having limited access to cooking facilities is keenly resented.

- Some of the facilities are very unpleasant. Some of us have experienced better accommodation in prison compared to bed and breakfasts.
- They are not always well heated; in one place the residents spent much of their time in bed to keep warm during the recent bad winter.
- There are no places to mix and socialise in.
- There is little to do and few places to go to in the day.
- We can spend much longer than we should in this sort of accommodation; one acquaintance having spent two years so far in a bed and breakfast.
- People with children shouldn't be housed in bed and breakfasts any more but they still are.
- We can witness behaviours such as people injecting heroin that we have not seen before.
- Finding ways of washing clothes and drying them can be hard too.
- Not knowing how long we can stay creates a great deal of anxiety.

"It is so wrong to live in a bedroom with 2 children, it still happens at the moment even though it shouldn't; it's devastating. It makes Social Work more aware of your kids which is frightening. They can't take friends home or things like that. Even if it's clean and nice you have to keep children under control and they can't be out the room."

We have a great resentment that landlords made a good profit out of our accommodation and yet the experience we have is usually very negative, even with sympathetic landlords and pleasant premises.

HOMELESS HOTEL ACCOMMODATION, DINGWALL, EAST ROSS

We have had mixed experiences of this.

Even though residents say it is much better than it was we can be exposed to people with addiction problems, and vulnerable women can get involved in unhealthy relationships without realising it.

However, some of us have had good experiences of the running of homeless hotel accommodation in Dingwall and report that staff are aware of the issues that we go through and keep the place as safe and pleasant as they can.

WATERLOO PLACE, INVERNESS

At Waterloo Place in Inverness we can take up supported homelessness accommodation for between 6 months and 2 years.

It is good compared to bed and breakfast. We have a kitchen, bedroom and living room. We can come and go as we want which is very important to us.

It is cheaper than bed and breakfast and now that there are CCTV cameras everywhere it is relatively safe. It is no different to any block of flats except the rooms are smaller. We value the security it offers, however we can lose our flats due to antisocial behaviour.

On the down side it is hard to work because of the cost of staying there if we earn a wage, but some people do.

We thought that it would be good if there were more places like this.

HOMELESSNESS DAY CENTRE, INVERNESS

People felt that the Day Centre is good. It is in the process of moving to near the police station and better premises which most of us are pleased about (but not everyone as those who are wanted by the police will probably no longer want to go along).

- We can go and get our clothes washing done for 50p.
- We can get cheap food.
- We can have a shower.
- There is shaving equipment.
- There is a part-time Community Psychiatric Nurse.
- There is a part-time Doctor.
- There is a part-time nurse.
- There is an addictions Community Psychiatric Nurse

It is excellent and the staff are very good. However, some homeless people are put off going because of the variety of people that attend. There are people recently out of prison and other people who cause trouble. They need facilities but some of us may feel put off. There may be people with serious addictions mixing with people with mental health problems mixing with people for whom this is their first experience of homelessness.

However, without it a lot of us with serious problems would have nowhere to go. It is a place where those of us with extreme problems can get specialised help from people who understand us.

There is a feeling that more of us go there to detox than in the past as there is a perception that it is now more difficult to detox in New Craigs, so some of us go to the Day Centre instead.

It has a strict policy of non-violence and has established good ways of maintaining good conduct. There is huge respect for the staff from amongst us, the clients.

It now caters to a large number of Polish people. There is a feeling that many Polish and other Eastern Europeans were invited to do short-term work who, on losing their employment, also became homeless and now that they are homeless cannot get work again.

If we arrive at the Centre saying we are homeless the staff will do all they can to get us a bed for the night. They are very good at dealing with all forms of social services.

Around 20 to 30 people sleep rough, using tarpaulins and borrowed sleeping bags, beyond the Ness Islands where they feel safer. An alternative is a churchyard that provides some shelter from the elements.

The Day Centre is staffed between 6pm and 8pm by volunteers from the Highland Homeless Trust who provide support and food. It is a very good service for those people who have almost nothing and can be a lifeline to rough sleepers.

CAIRDEAS COTTAGE, INVERNESS

This Mental Health Drop-in Centre provides cheap or free food to people who are homeless. This is much appreciated as is the support and drop in space.

ISSUES AFFECTING THOSE OF US WHO ARE HOMELESS

EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE

We are often subject to violence and abuse from other people including fellow homeless people.

One of us, who has been homeless for the last one and half years, has been knocked unconscious three times and robbed of £2000 in this time. He puts this down to being particularly vulnerable at some times and exposed to people willing to take advantage of this vulnerability.

One of us found that, having been beaten up when they were drunk, the police didn't believe the story that they gave and were initially inclined to charge him. This didn't help with issues of trust or gaining justice for their assault.

THE POLICE

We had mixed experiences with the police.

Some of us feel that once we become homeless we are more likely to be viewed as potential criminals by the police than as potential victims of crime.

Some of us have had different experiences. After frequent contact with the police, the police can become used to us, refer to us by name and talk and joke with us.

There was a feeling that, in a slightly less regulated past, the police were able to use their discretion more freely, so if we were in a critical situation, we were given access to the police station or cells as a place of refuge rather than somewhere to be put as a consequence of misconduct.

CRIME

Whilst we are often victims of crime if we are homeless we can also be perpetrators but, on occasion, we get in to trouble when we shouldn't. An example was given by one of us, who kept his prescribed diazepam loose in his wallet. When this was discovered by the police he was charged with intent to supply drugs.

Due to his anxiety about the courts and police and his personal situation he paid his fine rather than attempt to explain himself.

EMPLOYMENT

Many of us can get trapped in homelessness. This is because the cost of paying for homeless accommodation exceeds what we can afford to pay out of our wages, if we get employment.

Some people both staff and homeless people think that projects that could get people into employment would solve many of the issues that they face

SUPPORT

There is a feeling that those of us living in homeless accommodation with a mental illness can often get little support with our illness, and that the poor quality of life that we experience at this time only serves to reduce our chances of recovery or of changing our circumstances.

SOCIAL ISOLATION

Many of us, who are homeless are very isolated. We can be wary of mixing with other people because of the variety of experience and behaviour that our

fellow homeless people exhibit. This can lead us to avoid our associates and withdraw from everyday social contact.

ADDICTION

There is a worry that many of us can become addicted to illegal substances due to the circumstances of our lives and the ready availability of drugs.

AFTER EFFECTS

Being re-housed is not always the end of the problems we face. On getting a house we may have no possessions to put in it, and the culmination of all the stress we have been through may reach a peak and find expression in breakdown.

GAINING TENANCIES

We have a strong feeling that very few of us who are homeless choose this lifestyle. Instead mental health problems, addictions and antisocial behaviour may conspire to make it impossible for us to maintain a tenancy successfully.

ATTITUDES

There is a great stigma to homelessness but there was some belief amongst us that the public were more sympathetic to the problem and more inclined to understand that we might have understandable reasons to explain our situation.

RURAL AREAS

There was a feeling that, although we tend to gravitate to Inverness for the facilities that are on offer, we could be better off staying in the area that we originate in.

Sometimes being well known in the local community and understood and accepted by the police and other officials leads to more sympathetic and accepting attitudes than are found in a relatively anonymous city.

Some of us find it easier and safer, when homeless in such areas to live in caves, ruins, bothies, tents or outbuildings and to survive by living off of the land through foraging for berries and mushrooms or fishing or hunting.

GENERAL PRACTITIONERS

We can lose contact with our GP or be removed from the GP register due to our behaviour. This causes problems with our health and denies us access to treatment.

Not all GP's are sympathetic to our lifestyle and circumstance. A missed appointment to register with a practice can lead to us not being accepted by that practice.

The Day Centre has a doctor available who we can use instead, and who has specialist knowledge of the issues facing people like us.

FAMILIES

The practice of housing homeless families in scatter flats is appreciated.

GOOD PRACTICE

We had a feeling that Inverness was quite good compared to other cities when dealing with people who are homeless.

MIGRANT WORKERS

We believe that there are a number of homeless migrant workers whose needs are not fully met at present.

ESCAPE

Some of us escaping personal trauma and unhappiness may see the Highlands as an attractive place to escape to. This means that we may be in considerable distress and yet may also arrive in the Highlands with no where to live.

HOUSING STOCK

We believe that one of the greatest causes of homelessness is the shortage of Council and affordable housing for us to live in, including supported accommodation for those who need help in maintaining tenancies.

MEN AND HELP

Some of us feel that many men are still reluctant to ask for help, admit to vulnerability, weakness or express personal feelings. This is likely to mean that homeless men are cautious about accessing and asking for help.

YOUNG PEOPLE

We believe that many young homeless people struggle with tenancies because they lack the everyday living skills to help them cope with a tenancy.

We believe that there are schemes that get young homeless people together in shared, staffed accommodation to help them learn these skills. This seems to be a good idea.

We would hope that increased measures are put in place to reduce homelessness among young people.

HEALTH SERVICES AND HOMELESSNESS

The Homeless Day Centre provides good medical cover to us, but this does not mean that it should act as the only service for those of us with health problems who are not able to adequately access mainstream medical services.

Mainstream services should take some time to examine why we might find it hard to access them.

We hope that the health function provided by the Day Centre continues to operate. Having seen the loss of the Beechwood designated beds we worry about the scale of the impact of any reduction in the sort of services that we are likely to use.

WHAT COULD IMPROVE THE SITUATION FOR HOMELESS PEOPLE?

There were a number of ideas we had that we thought would improve life for those of us who are homeless or reduce the impact of homelessness:

- It would be good to have high quality 'hostels' run/funded by the state where people can cook, get food, do their washing and find social things to do together in safety.
- It would be good if there were social venues for people who are housed in bed and breakfast establishments.
- It would be good if people in bed and breakfasts had cooking facilities.
- The Homeless Day Centre is very good for all sorts of things varying from benefits, housing, mental health, addictions, physical health and helping foreign nationals. We hope that the new premises improve accessibility to this service.
- More accessibility to cheap affordable housing would decrease the problem of homelessness.
- We need to deal with the main social causes of homelessness (such as addiction, mental illness and debt) if we are to truly reduce the scale of homelessness.
- We could capitalise on the common humanity we can all offer each other.
- It would be helpful if the people who need help were willing and able to ask for help and then get it.
- We hope that all people discharged from psychiatric hospitals have accommodation to go to including some sort of staged accommodation for those that would struggle on their own.

LAST THOUGHTS

For most of us, there is nothing positive that can be said about homelessness and the experiences that are associated with it.

A few of us feel that the growing attitude of some members of the community who, from an early age, do not believe they will ever get a job and take the abuse of substances to be an inevitable part of their upbringing, can only serve to increase the likelihood of homelessness increasing.

However, a few of us have come through the experience of homelessness and can now see something positive our situation although still regarding homelessness as an experience people should not have to endure in any society. Although the experience of homelessness is unacceptable, coming through it to a better life has made a few of us more personally tolerant and accepting, we find we appreciate other people more and, through this appreciation, become better and kinder people ourselves.

Finally, finding accommodation and learning to live in it can help us to leave much of the lifestyle and experiences that perpetuate homelessness behind.

"Having a flat has meant that I have had no problems any more with the police."

APPENDIX A

Two stories from Skye and Lochalsh

Person A

"I lived in a B&B in Lochalsh. The owners did not have any certificates such as disclosure, health and safety or food hygiene. They had not been assessed by the Council or the homeless department.

I felt that they got an extortionate tax free income from the Council for very little effort and resented this.

My living conditions were awful; the landlord was often drunk and took every opportunity to be around me. I was extremely scared of him but couldn't do anything about it as I had no where else to live. I had no privacy even when using the loo or the shower, the landlord could see me through its glass door.

Sometimes I had to eat meals in the shed as there was no table to use. If I didn't eat in the shed then I ate from the kitchen food preparation surfaces. There were dog hairs every where, even on the plates I ate off. The dog sometimes ate off of the plates I used.

I had to pay extra money for the heating but was always cold and had no control over when it was on or not.

There was no lock on my bedroom door which made me feel very vulnerable.

The house was not clean at all; all in all it felt degrading. I felt like I was just surviving. I did raise some of my concerns with the Council but they just dismissed them.

In the end I left and found living in a 12 foot caravan preferable to that B&B.

I see nothing positive about:

- being homeless
- enduring the conditions
- enduring the lack of care and support
- enduring the insecurity
- enduring the trespass on your own personal rights
- enduring the attitude that I am a beggar and an enemy
- having no dignity and respect
- having no home comforts

- landlords not abiding by what I think should be minimum standards

Homelessness has not made me a better person. We have been conditioned to believe our affliction does us good – NO.”

Person B

“I was technically homeless for a year, staying with friends; an elderly couple in a crumbling croft house. The lady had advanced Alzheimer’s and I was able to help a bit in the house and contribute towards electricity bills out of my job seekers allowance.

Needless to say there were no jobs for the likes of me, apart from very casual ‘cash in hand’ chores which did nothing for my health, mental or physical. The attic room that I occupied had no central heating and that winter was cold.

Towards the second summer, the council found me a house. I moved in with my boxes and bin bags of clothes, a bed and a cooker given by friends, a couple of old chairs that I had paid too much for and a radio.

I sat down and looked at the freshly painted walls, carpetless floor, curtainless windows and I thought that I was now safe; I had a place of my own, and things would now be getting better.

Well; any available jobs were seasonal and involved heavy lifting and scrubbing which I could not do. I was declared too old for customer service, which I had, one way or another, been doing all my working life – youngsters were available during school holidays and needed to be paid only peanuts. Experience and skills did not matter. I had an empty house, no money to equip it, and, once again no future. The doctors’ surgery provided antidepressants, but they were not enough. I had four walls, prozac and a few pounds to feed me.

I was lucky, a caring person from the CAB found me sobbing my eyes out, close to a breakdown, and informed the local Mental Health Association. They came to me, took me to the ‘drop in’, talked to me, listened to me, showed me the way to talking and trusting people, and helped to find some creature comforts that I could eventually afford , such as furniture for instance!

Everything in my house is second or third hand, but it is mine, and I have learnt to live on the basic state pension. I have to watch every penny, and often I would like to give myself a treat but can’t, but I am surviving.

I was lucky. There are thousands of people who have not had my luck. I know how they feel.

But it should not be a matter of luck. A human being should have a right to live a human life: having a home and a way to make a living. Some of us are unable to work; some of us are denied the chance, often because of stigma or prejudice or simply because of ignorance. There are countless people who do not get employment, despite their talents or their education or their experience, because they suffer from mental ill health. People without employment often cannot find homes; people without a home cannot find employment. Is this right?"

APPENDIX B

Homelessness in Inverness

Person C

"I was living in Ullapool; a small village in North West Highland. Due to long term mental health and alcohol problems I was made homeless.

I decided to move to Inverness where I could get better medical help and find educational opportunities. When I reached Inverness I was put in a B&B for homeless people.

I was surprised at how basic it was; with just a microwave, fridge, bed and wardrobe. It was winter and the room wasn't bright enough to read in at night.

I had lived in shared accommodation for 20 years but this was the most desolate place I had lived in. It was very difficult to get food and to eat healthily. The other residents were a mixture of people with mental health problems and people with addictions which was difficult, as you would get 'junkies' knocking on your door asking for money a lot.

I was lucky. For the first four months I was mentally well and I started to go to the day centre at Waterloo Place. The staff were great but the clientele were very mixed and there was a lot of silent aggression.

I got on well but after an episode when I was robbed and all my camping equipment was taken I started to drink. I was an easy target for people and they could see I was ill. I was knocked unconscious soon after that. This put me in hospital with severe concussion which made my mental health much worse.

I realised that socialising with other homeless people would make me worse but didn't know where to find other friends. I realised other homeless people's problems also got worse as a result of being homeless, whether through mental illness or addiction.

I got well for a while but was always up and down. Being homeless made me much worse than before and I ended up in hospital much more often with overdoses.

Twice, when I was ill, I was coerced into shoplifting, even though I had money to pay for things, but I wanted to fit in with other homeless people. I feel very bad about this now.

Earlier this year I was moved into a supported flat. I had problems with this, as it was the first time on my own, and for a couple of months I was in hospital a lot.

I am better now than I used to be and I am very strict with other people and what I give them. This week I move in to permanent accommodation after two years of being homeless.

I never want to be in that situation again as it was one of the worst times of my life.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With thanks to all the members of HUG, and other mental health service users, who contributed to this report.

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