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Research Summary

Evaluation of the Effectiveness of the Sacro Supported Accommodation Service:
A Service User Perspective

Introduction

The Glasgow Supported Accommodation Service provided by Sacro accommodates a maximum of 60 service users at a time who meet the criteria of being on a statutory criminal justice order, are single, homeless, have identifiable support needs and have a 'live' Glasgow connection.

Service users move into one of 60 temporary furnished flats, which the agency can access through Glasgow Homelessness Partnership. Service users receive support from Sacro to address their individual needs (e.g., independent living skills, assistance in accessing benefits, etc.). If this term in temporary accommodation has been a positive experience with relation to re-offending, co-operation and attitude change, they can then be recommended for a permanent tenancy. The average time spent by the service user in the supported accommodation process is approximately eight months before an independent tenancy is secured.

Aim

The research sought to identify the ways in which the participants view the effectiveness of the service provision, how the service could be improved, and highlight any possible processes needed to be in place for promoting desistance.

Method

In order to best collect evidence of service users experience the qualitative method used was consensual face-to-face, semi-structured interviews focusing around the service user experience of support, accommodation, attitudes toward re-offending, and planning for their respective futures. Seven participants were invited to present themselves at the agency located in Glasgow city centre at a pre-arranged time. The data was then analysed by the researcher working in conjunction with research staff at both Glasgow Caledonian and Sacro who identified and extracted prominent themes that were emerging from the interviews. The results were then used to gauge how 'effective' the service provision is from a service user's perspective.

Results

The results are arranged into topics under the emerging themes from the interviews.

Accommodation, Benefits and Budgeting

"Having a roof over your head is a 'vital' and massive step in my development; everybody should have a 'base' shouldn't they?"
-Service user

All participants reported needing practical help with issues surrounding housing information and filling in often-complex registration or housing application forms. Every participant also suggested that advice and particularly advocacy on their behalf in dealing with Housing Associations, was extremely beneficial, if not indeed, crucial.

However the two participants who had now moved on to permanent tenancy, found that financial and emotional problems were a bit '*overwhelming*' and expressed a feeling that they could have been '*better prepared*' by the agency during this period of transition.

Both felt they required extra financial and budgeting support at this time, and suggested that Sacro could possibly explore any new avenues of financial support which may be available to them. As well as the financial difficulties they were experiencing, both also expressed fears over the degree of independence they felt had come too quickly for them. These service users both felt that, '*they were left too much on their own*' and suggested that they should have had '*more warning*' or '*some sort of training*' during this vital phase in their development, and that on-going Sacro support would have been beneficial to them.

Service users who were now in a permanent tenancy thought they '*felt obligated*' to accept the offer of a flat, and another expressed a degree of dissatisfaction in that it was '*small... and reminds me of my prison cell, but I have to be grateful...Don't I?*'

Most participants also reported needing help with issues around budgeting. In relation to this, one participant seemed to sum up the general feelings of the group by the statement, '*I did not have a clue how to live*'. This being made in reference to their perceived lack of independent living skills, such as paying bills, shopping and cooking for example. Another participant went on to state that:

"On the 'inside' all these things that other people take for granted (especially housing and rent issues such as paying bills, and the ability to be self-sufficient) are taken away from you."

-Service user

The above quote may serve as a reminder of the institutionalising effects of prison. Namely, that any history of experiencing facilities which remove individuals from mainstream society such as prison, can have on the self-reliance, and perceived social capital of this type of service users. It is feasible that the institutionalisation process may be impacting on any ability to be confident enough to adequately address this. From the reported data it can be surmised that budgeting skills are almost essential in reaching a sense of independence and minimises any negative effect on the self esteem of service users who required assistance with these skills.

Planning for Future. Promoting Independence

"Coming 'out' (of prison)... it's hard work man! Every time I get out I have plans that I have made... know... things I want to do, but the pressure gets too much, its too hard... nobody wants to really make things easy for you to just get on with your life. It's like you against the world and they are not letting you in....I usually just ended up doing the usual..."

-Service user

Falling in to old and familiar behaviour patterns, as referred to above, has been the experience of most participants, and the interruption of this cycle can be seen as crucial in both promoting independence and the future desistance process.

All but one participant stated that Sacro has helped to increase their sense of independence. This was done in a variety of ways, and the six who responded had varying answers but all felt they had personally contributed to this process, albeit by differing degrees.

The variation of responses which service users believed made this possible ranged from:

- Sacro instigating structure and routine;
- Continuous positive encouragement;
- Role-modelling;
- Perceived 'good advice';
- Help to overcome negative thought patterns;
- A reduction in feelings of being 'overwhelmed';
- A growth in self-confidence and self-belief.

These six participants also felt that this independence was achieved through a process of mutual co-operation and respect between them and Sacro. For some this was their first ever tenancy, temporary or permanent, and this factor greatly enhanced their feelings of independence.

The strongest theme to emerge from this question was a feeling that they were now a *'part of something'* and that they were heading in a positive direction, even if their immediate 'destination' was only a permanent tenancy.

It is evident that support is beneficial, if not indeed crucial for promoting both independence and enabling desistance; however some service users reported they were experiencing difficulties in adjusting to the independence that comes at the time of gaining their own tenancy. This could be a clear indication of further support needs after Sacro withdrawal.

Emotional Support, Trust & Respect, Loneliness

"Well... put it this way.... if it wasn't for Sacro, I would've went off my nut... just went bananas!"

-Service user

Significantly, all participants but one admitted that they shared more with their Sacro worker than with anyone else previously, or presently, in their lives. This included family and other professionals. Participants revealed they had shared at least to some degree, issues surrounding bereavement, relationships, childhood abuse and drug and alcohol problems, *'because, at least they (Sacro) try to understand...'*

Although the notion of loneliness was never referred to in any specific question, it was a prominent and recurring theme throughout the research. Indeed almost all participants in one form or another expressed this. The only difference being the use of different terms such as, *'alone', 'totally on my own'* and *'isolation'*. The use and frequency of such terms by participants may be an indication of unmet 'needs' for security, stability and a wider social dimension to their lives. It may also serve to highlight just how vulnerable this group of service users really feel.

"When you get out (of prison) you think 'yes' and that it's a 'result', but...it's probably one of the most scary feelings you can get....especially if you don't really have anywhere to go. It's probably the times when I have felt, more than any other, that I don't really belong anywhere.... no wonder I just went and got 'full of it' (taking drugs and alcohol)... it was probably to take all them rotten feelings away!"

-Service user

Although most mentioned the issue of feeling 'lonely' at differing stages of their interview, two participants felt they could not discuss this issue with Sacro. Both believing that, *'it's 'no' exactly the kind of thing you talk about is it? Not to anybody!'*. However, the other five felt able to discuss this, reportedly for the first time in their lives, with their respective workers. Again this may highlight the degree of trust and respect they feel toward their respective worker.

Although there was diminishing feelings of service users having to, *'always look after myself...nobody else really gives a f***...!'*, it must be noted that those who had now moved on from the Supported Accommodation to more independent living appeared to be more affected by this issue now, than in the previous period of more intensive support. This may suggest that initially these lonely 'feelings' subside over the period when Sacro involvement is at its optimum, however for these two participants at least, this issue was not, if indeed it could be, adequately addressed.

What does seem to be significant in relation to this issue is the fact that all participants believe that *'just knowing Sacro is there for them'* or *'being able to drop in for a chat'*, was a source of some relief and security to them and created to an extent some sense of *'...belonging to something'*.

Attitudes, Behaviours & Re-Offending

*"One of the best things.... Is, being able to run my ideas by my worker, who 'gets' me to see things different now. In the past...I have tended to...'think the wrong things', if you know what I mean! Before (Sacro involvement) I just had a bad attitude, you know, like... f*** them, f*** everybody. I always seemed to end up in the wrong places with the wrong kind of people, and end up in all sorts of s***!. Know what I mean!"*

-Service user

The above statement represents an overarching theme with regard to attitudes, behaviours and offending behaviour, and seems to indicate the crucial role played by individual workers and regular contact, in instigating positive changes to the service user's outlook on a range of issues.

All but two participants concede to having had problems with drug and/or alcohol use, and they felt that this was concomitant with their offending behaviour. The participants in question reported that their addiction problems have now been reduced to either, a more manageable level or eradicated altogether. This was attributed by them to the structure, planning for the future, and regular routine of their involvement with the service, but was felt to be mainly due to the 'role-modelling' feature of their *'close relationship'* they reportedly had established with their individual worker.

*What I'm trying to say is that.... I think things through a lot more because of (Sacro worker). Like when I go back to my old area...my old mates are all f***** with drugs, and still ducking and diving! When I see them up to the same old s*** I used to do, shoplifting, robbing people... crashing in motor windows and all that, well I don't know....it would be dead easy just to slip back into that life again, but I just think that what they're doing... it's a bit out of order, but that's up to them isn't it? It's mad to think I done all that stuff, but it's good to know I don't have to do it any more! I just don't need it, (Sacro worker) never lets me forget this, it's as simple as that! When I've got problems or I'm struggling with 'stuff', sometimes I think...what would (Sacro worker) do here?"*

-Service user

All participants, particularly in relation to criminogenic issues, reported a sizable shift in their attitude, in some cases expressions of remorse or regret were made, they believed that this attitude change had impacted on their behaviours in a positive sense. Every participant cited that they now have more sympathy for the victims of crime and have substantially reduced, or engage in no re-offending behaviour, or reported any reverse moral career. This was also applicable to those who claim they would be reluctant to disclose any recidivism to their worker.

"Aye...it probably is down to their (Sacro) help that I am not running about scoring drugs or breaking into houses. You could say I trust (Sacro worker) more

than anybody the day..., so I probably take on board what he says. They've showed me that things didn't always have to be the way they were, that I didn't have to keep going back 'inside' (prison) and I didn't have to keep doing what I was doing.... I suppose I've spent that much time in the nick (prison) that I just thought that was what happened to people like me."

-Service user

"Before, I just didn't care! Anything that happened to me was just...well; it sort of comes with the territory doesn't it. People done stuff to me so I'm just going to do it back! As I said to you before, I just didn't care. It probably wasn't until I came here and started listening to (Sacro worker) that 'things' (consequences) ...started to matter, what I mean is... I suppose I started to care about things that didn't used to matter, like the 'damage' I was doing to other people, so I suppose...aye, I would say that the chats I've had with (Sacro worker) could probably take the credit for that! ... Things are different the day, I've got more respect for myself now, and aye...I would say more respect for other people as well."

-Service user

When asked specifically why this is now the case, this service user suggested this change was due to reciprocity of respect between Sacro and himself.

It also appears that trust and respect are again key themes here, and recurred frequently across the majority of interviews. Both trust and respect had to be 'experienced' by all the service users before they felt they could engage with their respective worker. These components of trust and respect working in conjunction with a continuous prompting to consider the consequences of their decisions and behaviours, especially where substance misuse was an issue, was generally considered by service users to be the main contributory factor in their achieving desistance.

Sacro, Social Work, Additional Comments

"The staff are very approachable, and have never turned me away when I needed to talk. At least they try to understand me and I'm sure I can trust them."

-Service user

Participants used words amongst others, such as helpful, supportive, consistent, available, friendly and 'always there' when asked to describe how they felt Sacro staff to be. Again a principal theme here was trust and respect, with six of seven mentioning at least one of these during their responses. Friendliness was also to the fore with this question. Even if service users could not access their own worker the way they were treated was overwhelmingly reported as one of being valued and respected. This feeling was not exclusive to the worker they had established a close relationship with, this also applied to any member of staff they have had contact with. This includes having to speak to alternative workers if their current one was unavailable, and also to administrative staff who answered the phone or met them at the reception when they visited the agency. This appeared to be best illustrated to them by the informal manner in which staff greeted them, asked how they were '*getting on*', and importantly the offer of a cup of tea.

"They seem genuinely interested in how I'm doing, asking how things are and remembering my name."

-Service user

Overall it could be said that interactions with staff at whatever level is one of the most important and positive aspects of the service users engagement with Sacro. The issues of trust, friendliness, respect and being approachable are things, which this group of service users feel is

sadly lacking with other agencies they have had to engage with. These other agencies included housing associations, benefits agencies and the Social Work Department.

Of paramount importance to all participants was the great comfort they derived from, '*Just knowing that they (Sacro) were there for them*'. The 'drop-in' facility on offer at Sacro was vital to this widely held view. All participants had accessed this service at one time or another, some apparently needing it more than others. One participant claimed that he did not use, or really need it that much, but that he derived a great sense of security from the knowledge that, '*...it was there if I need it*'.

Asked to surmise what their life may be like without Sacro involvement the overwhelming answer was encapsulated by a phrase used on most occasions, that is, '*...a lot worse*'. Possibly this was because they could not '*see they had much of a chance in life*'. They generally responded with answers which may indicate a previously poor self-concept as well as self-defeating patterns of thinking, indeed three participants intimated that they anticipate something '*bad*' is going to happen to them. This reported anxiety/fear was in spite of feeling that this was possibly the most productive and purposeful time of their lives so far.

Not one participant speculated that they would have seen any improvement to their lives without Sacro. Indeed there was a general sense of fatalism from their responses. Five participants were sure their problems around drugs and alcohol would certainly have increased, and since this was inextricably linked to their offending, they were of the view that they would be 'back inside'. One participant felt they would be "totally lost", yet another believed they would be, "heavily back on drugs, in prison or dead" this statement is not overstated, since they claimed that these were the only possible outcomes to be expected from the way they lived their life, and that this was evidenced by what had happened to most of his peers. Another participant stresses how Sacro have helped with breaking the cycle of them going back to prison on a regular basis, and significantly, that this is the longest period they have had without 'getting into any trouble'. One other speculates that they would still be 'drifting aimlessly through life' and that there would be 'a really good chance' of them re-offending. Another participant claims to have been at 'boiling point... ready to explode!' with frustration and anger before Sacro intervention. Even those participants, who did not think they would have relapsed as far back as others, still were of the opinion that isolation, loneliness; trying to "*cope with life*" or having "*no direction*" would have led to some deterioration in the social and emotional dimensions of their life.

Conclusions and recommendations

Strengths

- Sacro's holistic approach to intervention has had a positive impact in addressing the negative effects of institutionalisation, labelling, stigma, self-fulfilling prophecy and general feelings of exclusion.
- The fact that they are a non-statutory sector agency seems to instill a deeper level of 'trust' for them and provides a stepping stone for them achieving autonomy.
- The ability to access a wide range of suitable resources and opportunities, most notably in the key area of accommodation are also seen as significant factors in promoting independence and inclusion.
- Reported positive changes to service user's self-esteem attributed to the perceived 'caring' attitude of staff; the constant encouragement with problem-solving; the process of negotiating and considering of future options and importantly; having the support of the agency 'behind' them are all factors which have led to an awareness of their potential.

- Vital components of 'trust' and 'respect' between service user and provider being present to some extent, mainly due to the perceived 'more caring' and friendly approach of Sacro.
- A major shift being reported with regard to attitudinal change, drug/alcohol use and re-offending. All service users now report considering the consequences of these behaviours, and the impact it has on the victims of their actions.
- Sacro appear to meeting their targets, in terms of reducing offending and safeguarding communities, at least during the short term of engagement with service users.

Weaknesses

- This research may have identified a need for a more efficient form of pre-release preparation. More specifically around the areas of dealing 'face-to-face' with official agencies, and the ability to adequately budget for themselves. Arguably these are some of the first obstacles these service users have to negotiate, and any 'failure' at this crucial stage could result in damaging consequences for achieving independence and desistance.
- It is also evident that when Sacro service provision has to withdraw, regarded as another crucial phase, it is causing a condition of stress and anxiety to service users who reportedly struggle with the overwhelming financial, social and emotional implications of this stage.
- At this time Sacro due to various constraints, are unable to provide some form of on-going support to alleviate the tensions which are re-surfacing at the time of service withdrawal.
- Although the issue of 'loneliness' may not be exclusive to Sacro service users, emotional issues such as this are outwith the scope of the agency and therefore service users may have to be referred to a more appropriate agency.

Limitations

- The 'drop-in' service run by the agency is seen as beneficial by service users. However the lack of any Throughcare type provision may be impacting on the service user's ability to fully integrate.
- Being a voluntary sector organisation means there could be insufficient time and resources with which Sacro could use to promote the shift to longer term sustained desistance.
- Limitations of this study mean there is no way to adequately gauge long term desistance.
- Currently Sacro can only address the more general needs of their service users. Since they are all individuals emerging from their own personal histories, a more 'bespoke' provision may prove to be more effective.

Recommendations

- More flexible support required at critical points identified by service users. These include the initial release/resettlement period, which can be overwhelming and de-motivating for some, especially those where effects of institutionalisation are most prevalent. They may require extra assistance with regard to practical help, and advocacy; since any perceived failure at this point may impact on achieving primary desistance and have a negative

consequence on any social and emotional progress. Disengagement from Sacro is another critical point. The 'abrupt' way this currently takes place is reportedly causing some distress. This phase is as crucial as initially leaving prison for service users, who have identified problems such as feelings of financial insecurity, loneliness and difficulties with social interactions. Sacro may have to try and extend some form of Throughcare approach than it can manage at present if they aim to promote any sustained desistance.

- Evidence has shown that maintaining contact with service users reduces re-offending (Lewis *et al.* 2007), and all indications are that the Circles of Support approach (Faux *et al.* 2005) could compliment the work of Sacro, since this is proving successful in regard to desistance. This may be a model the agency could explore further, and would be in keeping with the commitment to provide services which meet the complex needs of service users, and furthermore may promote sustained desistance and safeguard communities.
- Further qualitative and quantitative research will be required to assess the impact of Sacro in the longer term and to ascertain if the findings of this report have true validity. This could be achieved by the agency posting out a quarterly s.a.e. to maintain some level of contact with those who have accessed the service. Included could be a questionnaire along with a general inquiry as to how ex-service users are 'getting on'. This could also ease the way for possible follow-up studies to potentially measure long term desistance if required by Sacro or any related party.

References

Faux, M. (2005) cited in, *Circles of Support and Accountability in the Thames Valley* [Online] at http://www.quaker.org.uk/shared_asp_files/uploadedfiles/82F718A7-9344-4A5C-A4A7-4B053FF22239_CirclesofSupport-first3yrs.pdf Accessed on 07.05.07

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