

Alternative Roots



Groundswell's project saw ex-homeless people share their stories with those currently homeless.

The Outside Story

Charity research identifies 'turning points' for the homeless

How did you escape homelessness? This simple question is the basis of a pioneering new piece of research, where homeless people asked formerly homeless people to share their stories of escape.

This is the first research project in the UK exclusively by and for people with experiences of homelessness and was conducted by the charity Groundswell.

"Despite the starkly differing journeys of the interviewees, there were some common threads that emerged," said Mike Hudson, one of the ex-homeless people running the project.

There were six main areas identified as turning points. Firstly, many 'escapees' indicated having a significant change in the way they related to themselves and others - 'overcoming pride and trusting people in order to be open to help'.

Secondly, being involved in group activities such as training or volunteering was identified by participants as a vital part of their recovery. "You've got to be part of a team, or part of a family, or part of a body of people. You can't expect to survive on your own. You need to be a part of something," said one participant. Hitting rock bottom was also a catalyst for

change. Many participants talked about having a sudden realisation, an 'epiphany' that they couldn't continue as they were.

Good homelessness workers and services were also significant, said Hudson:

"Participants identified a good support worker as someone who will go that extra mile, be consistent, and knows how to use their experiences. Also, someone who will challenge, encourage, value opinions, congratulate and show that they care."

Family and friends were also universally instrumental. The majority of participants had experienced difficult relationships, but family and friends also supported and motivated their journeys away from homelessness.

Finally, coming to terms with being homeless, and not being ashamed of it, was important. All agreed that they had learnt a lot from their experiences, both good and bad.

Groundswell now hope to take those lessons directly to their work with people at the homeless hostels, day centres and soup runs.

"The biggest surprise for me was that very few accounts made much reference to the physical availability of housing," said 52-year-old Hudson, for whom a stint in prison was his 'turning point'. "While having stable shelter and a base is a fundamental aspect to the issue of homelessness, it did not feature strongly in these case studies.

For more information about Groundswell go to www.groundswell.org.uk

Banking On Goodwill

Streetbank shows that everyone can have good neighbours

There is no such thing as society," ex-British PM Margaret Thatcher infamously said. Well, Maggie, there is! Proof that community and goodwill isn't confined to a twee Victorian past comes in the form of a new community project - Streetbank.

Dreamt up by co-founders Sam Stephens and Ryan Davies, it provides an online space for people to offer either skills or items to loan or give to those who live within a 1,000-yard radius.

The neat idea is simply 'to bring neighbourhoods closer together and make the world a little bit nicer'. "If you give away an old TV or lend a mower, what you get is a warm feeling

"The fastest way to make friends with people is to ask for a favour"

inside," says Stephens, who believes that connecting with each other, the community and ourselves is a win-win for both individual and societal well-being.

Since its launch in April this year, the site has already attracted more than 2,000 members. So be it repairing a neighbour's bike or lending a cake tin, just 'be bold, be generous and make requests' because, as Sam points out, "The fastest way to make friends with people is to ask for a favour."

Fans of Freecycle - the online community that matches people who have things they want to get rid of with people who can use them - will appreciate the extension Streetbank provides, with its emphasis on lending and the offering of skills. Log online now, and you'll see that current offers include lessons in how to bake a cake, how to use Photoshop, and free dog walking.

To Stephens though, it's about far more than just baking and pets. "I think that community can achieve the end of poverty," he adds. "I genuinely believe that - we can have access to the things we need and tackle loneliness if we're just willing to co-operate with each other. If we act independently, we only have what we own and what our bank balance allows. When we cooperate, the sky's the limit!"

For more information, go to www.streetbank.com

Sam Stephens (centre) co-founded Streetbank

