



Kindliness – developing peer support within sheltered housing in Dorset

This case study focuses on a toolkit developed by Bournemouth University working in partnership with Dorset County Council and a number of housing associations.

It is set against a background of reduced funding for support services which resulted in plans to end the sheltered housing service funded by Dorset County Council in April 2018. The toolkit helps landlords to develop peer support in sheltered housing services.



This case study defines the concept of kindliness as it relates to sheltered housing and outlines interventions which can be used to seek to engender the culture change often necessary to optimise peer support and kindliness in sheltered housing environments.

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Kindliness

“Kindliness is about peer support... a background hum of sociability, respectful regard and a willingness to help. When people are aware of a need, or ask for help, then this latent potential moves into action.” [Allen, 2015]¹

The word ‘Kindliness’ reflects a wide range of informal helping. There is much overlap between kindness and the notion of neighbourliness - an awareness of the situation of other residents; respect for their privacy; but a readiness to take action if help is needed.

In Dorset, the concept of kindness was developed in response to funding changes that challenge those providing supported housing for older people.

The toolkit² described in this paper was an outcome of a research project aiming to develop peer support in Sheltered Housing. This was commissioned by Dorset County Council with funding from Skills for Care, Dorset County Council, Magna Housing Association, Spectrum Housing Association and East Boro Housing Trust and was undertaken by Bournemouth University.

Background

In 2003, the sheltered housing service was a significant part of the Supporting People (SP) programme in Dorset. However, the removal of the SP ring fence in 2010 and recent austerity measures have reduced the council’s ability to fund non-statutory services.

The last fifteen years have also seen the removal of resident staff from most sheltered housing schemes and a move to the use of sheltered housing to meet the needs of older people whether or not they have support needs.

These drivers have resulted in regular reductions in the funding available for sheltered housing services.

Engagement by Dorset County Council commissioners with service users in 2015 highlighted that some people did not want to pay for the service, asking why they should pay for something they did not want or need. This made it difficult to justify continuing to fund a universal service.

Other views expressed by service users included:

- Building design was important, with sheltered housing providing manageable, compact, accessible and warm space.
- Feeling safe and secure was important, this was a result of the security of the building, intercom, strong doors, windows and locks.
- The sense of security and community resulting from peer identification (knowing your neighbour).
- The common room was seen as a way of reducing social isolation, although many would like to see common rooms used better.

¹ Allen, M. et al (2015), *Landscapes of helping: Kindliness in neighbourhoods and communities*, www.jrf.org.uk

² James, R., Cutts, W., Crossen-White, H and Parker, J. (2017), *Kindliness in Sheltered Housing Toolkit*, Bournemouth University and Dorset County Council
www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/type/Kindliness-Toolkit/

However, the importance of these services and the community network afforded by sheltered housing was also stressed: service users said:

- Support workers were important and greatly appreciated.
- 24/7 help on hand / careline was important and greatly appreciated.

Since April 2016, a £4 per week per property service has been provided with County funding the service for those in receipt of housing benefit. However, this service ends in March 2018, when it is planned that it will be replaced by the Dorset Integrated Prevention and Support Service providing tenure-neutral floating support to vulnerable adults.

The package of mitigation developed as part of the decommissioning process includes plans to assess vulnerable service users and provide appropriate care and support. A key part of this package is the provision of the Kindliness Toolkit, encouraging landlords to work with service users to develop the principles of Kindliness in their schemes.

Methodology

The challenge of nurturing kindness in the sheltered housing environment should not be underestimated. It requires culture change and a willingness to review established policies which seek to regulate life in sheltered housing schemes.

Bournemouth University trialled a range of innovative activities in order to inform the development of the toolkit. It was decided to use an innovative arts methodology within the realm of Performative Social Science. This is a fusion of the arts and social science, creating a new model in which 'tools from the arts and humanities are explored for their utility in enriching the ways in which social science subjects can be researched and/or findings can be disseminated or presented to audiences' (Jones 2006)³

Performance Poetry

This methodology is influenced by 'Seldom Heard Voices' work carried out by Bournemouth University which has pioneered performance poetry with young people with disabilities.⁴

The poet we used was Jonny Fluffypunk who has been working with the University's Faculty of Health and Social Science for some time with projects addressing dementia, disability and homelessness.

Performance poetry, in particular, with its focus on "diversity, inclusion and democracy" is "verse to which, at least theoretically, anyone can have access and whose worth anyone can determine" (Somers-Willett 2009: 5).

Embracing all types of poetry and spoken word, performance poetry can become a form of social action which reaches out to touch the hearts and minds of the audience in a direct and transformative way as the poet/performer becomes the educator enabling the audience to access another world, and the performance setting itself may also provoke social interaction and dialogue to generate new questions or to inspire the audience to themselves become an agent of change (Hodges, Fenge and Cutts 2014; Moxley, Feen-Calligan and Washington 2012; Sherry and Shouten 2002).

³ Jones, K. (2006), 'A biographic researcher in pursuit of an aesthetic: The use of arts-based (re)presentations in "performative" dissemination of life stories', *Qualitative Sociology Review*, April, available online at: www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/index_eng.php

⁴ https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=Wq7_qtnjxjg

Poetry workshops were used to identify the meaning of ‘kindliness’ understood by residents and staff of both urban and rural Sheltered Housing schemes.

In one instance this led to exploration of how to facilitate social needs in the climate of Health and Safety fears; for example, where can a barbecue be held and who can use the common room? Safeguarding was also a recurrent theme. Should we use the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) to check whether residents, who are willing to help peers, had a criminal record?

Forum Theatre

This is another technique often used to gain understanding of the concerns of Seldom Heard people and seemed to be the ideal partner for the poetry methodology.

Forum Theatre asks that the audience become the directors of the stage play and intervene to guide the plot and dialogue. This becomes a forum for discussion and a partnership. This choice was also supported by the fact that ‘State of Play’, for whom this method of enquiry had been a specialism, had been working locally in Dorset and with the Faculty of Health and Social Studies at the university in the past.

State of Play is an informal company of Dorset based freelance community and educational theatre practitioners.⁵ They have used Forum Theatre for more than thirty years, in training sessions for community and school groups, as well as for council employees and NHS staff.

Forum Theatre helped us to identify with residents instances of kindness and how we should be striving to be kind. However, we heard of what ‘unkindness’ was from one lady ... in partnership with the resident participants we were able to use the theatre technique to help her with a very difficult personal problem. This instance led us to begin looking at unmet emotional needs and signposting. Her story has subsequently been anonymised and used as a resource for forum theatre within the workshops.

Facilitation

We supplemented artistic enquiry with ‘Facilitation of Kindness’ workshops with housing association staff at several schemes in Dorset.

Facilitation is an important tool for organisations which can be used with groups of people in meetings, planning sessions, and training. The group is facilitated in the process of working together so that they may set the agenda and identify goals.

One person in the group or someone brought in from outside will focus on how the process is going and make sure that the ground rules are adhered to. This person is the “facilitator.” The role of the Facilitator is to support everyone to do their best thinking. To do this, the facilitator encourages full participation, promotes mutual understanding and cultivates shared responsibility. A facilitator enables group members to work efficiently and effectively in searching for and achieving inclusive and sustainable solutions and agreements.

Facilitation sessions were run with housing association sheltered housing staff to identify their understanding of kindness, how they perceive it as part of their skill set and job role and how they or their organisation might facilitate kindness amongst residents. As part of this process barriers to kindness were also identified, e.g. how health and safety might hamper cooperation and mutual assistance.

⁵ www.stateofplayarts.co.uk

It is also advisable to recruit an experienced facilitator to support the poet and actors as they deliver their sessions. This could be someone from a university, a community development worker or a freelance facilitator.

We used a facilitator who was experienced in international development in India and in education in the UK. She joined the Market and Coastal Towns Initiative in 2003 as a community facilitator, working with community groups to prepare regeneration strategies in more than 16 towns across Devon and Somerset until the end of the programme in 2007.

Facilitation workshops with the sheltered housing staff were run in partnership with a Senior Lecturer in Community Development from within the Faculty of Health and Social Science. These were held in the common rooms at sheltered housing schemes.

In our facilitation workshops we discovered difficulties around 'change management', organisational culture and the need for kindly treatment of staff by their management. The workshops turned out to be timely and in two instances they prevented the resignation of staff members.

We also discovered that residents would like to see more young people and were disappointed when we turned up as they thought it would be students coming to the workshops.

We also put Random Acts of Kindness Boxes into the schemes and staff offices and used them at conferences. People were encouraged to complete a slip of paper outlining an act of kindness they have performed or received and place the slip of paper in the box. We found that this raised consciousness and encouraged thought and behaviour change.

The Toolkit

The toolkit was developed from the empirical evidence gathered during the work outlined above. The activities have been found to work by enabling participants to reality check the current system and identify what is actually going on in the schemes they manage or live in.

The toolkit is intended to be a practical guide to culture change in sheltered housing and beyond. After setting the scene, section 4 illustrates the innovative methods that can be used to achieve this including the use of Forum Theatre, performance poetry and skilled facilitators. It stresses the importance of preparation before a workshop or similar activity takes place. Section 5 then considers how to be prepared for the unexpected, and in particular how to cope when a participant discloses a distressing aspect of their life.

The heart of the toolkit, section 6, examines how to run a kindness workshop. It considers the environment and how to make participants feel welcome. It outlines the key interventions: theatre, poetry and facilitation. The performers and facilitators used during the development of the toolkit are detailed along with tips on finding people in your area.

As some of the suggested methods are relatively rarely used in work with staff and service users, the key interventions are then detailed, in section 7, along with exactly how a session could be organised.

The final part of the toolkit, section 8, reflects on learning and reactions of participants of the workshops run during the development of this toolkit.

Outcomes

During the development of the toolkit, the workshops identified barriers to kindness. Some examples of these are:

- Limitations of facilities, some schemes lacking communal space
- Lack of staff time for community development and facilitation of activities
- Lack of recognition of emotional problems
- Limited signposting knowledge
- Territorial practices within shared facilities, for instance, lounge gatekeepers
- Prejudice and exclusive practices amongst residents, for instance reserved chairs and unwelcoming groups
- Lack of access for members of the public to the schemes
- Inward looking schemes with few community links

The facilitation intrinsic in the workshops focussed on finding solutions to these generally surmountable issues.

At a time when sheltered housing services are being decommissioned countrywide, but where the schemes continue to exist, we wanted to help to enable landlords to continue to deliver a valued and distinct sheltered housing service.

Embedding a culture of kindness should:

- Allow **staff** to step back as a result of increased resident peer support
- Increase **resident** wellbeing, empowerment and involvement as a result of living in a mutually supporting community, where people are willing to help and support each other
- Make the **scheme** a more cohesive community and place where people want to live
- Enable the **landlord** to deliver a more cost effective service, with fewer voids, less housing management issues and more motivated staff
- Reduce the need for care and support delivered by the **Adult Social Care Authority**
- Improve resident health, reducing demand on the **NHS**, as a result of being more active and connected to the local community

Some participants found that the experience exceeded their expectations:

- *It was thought-provoking and interesting whilst offering practical ideas and new skills. These helped in terms of ways to encourage kindness.*
- *I got some great ideas on how to establish and enhance a kindness ethos in my schemes.*
- *I learnt about funding opportunities, community support, housing allocations and telephone contact. It all needs thoughtful planning.*

Will this toolkit make a difference?

As a participant said during a poetry session: *Kindness is addictive and contagious.*

Dissemination

The project has now reached its dissemination stage and we have produced a toolkit for use with landlords and residents in housing schemes.

Its aim is to help to make sheltered housing schemes sustainable, self-supporting communities fit for purpose and fit for the future. The toolkit aims to help landlords enable residents to remain independent and valued members of the community, to increase kindness and mutual co-operation and friendship.

It is also a community development tool and thus has few boundaries when it comes to usage. It lays out a clear rationale for developing kindness and outlines how to identify the facilitators and run workshops.

We have tested it out with participants at a local housing conference and received a warm response. The arts methodologies were particularly well received. We have also used it in workshops at a Local Housing Association's conference and showcased it at the Housing LIN's annual conference in March 2017. It has also been presented within Bournemouth University's Faculty of Health and Social Science Humanising Care Conference seeking to encourage good professional practice.

Conclusions

George Monbiot of The Guardian commended this partnership project and endorsed this work within the toolkit. He has recently been talking about isolation and loneliness. He could see where our work fitted into this picture.

"It's brilliant to see a local authority working with a university and housing association to use Kindliness as a means of building community and tackling our loneliness epidemic. I strongly believe that the Kindliness initiative's use of poetry and theatre offers creative ways to raise awareness and bring people together. Kindliness is not dead.... The Kindliness Conference can help to unleash it."

George Monbiot, February 2017.

We are still asked to define Kindliness. Perhaps that's best left to a group of Magna Housing Association's staff and residents:

About 50 Definitions of Kindliness

Kindliness

Is caring for others

Is genuine love for one's fellow man

Is sharing my vegetables with next door neighbours

Kindliness

Is getting a Christmas card from someone you've not known long

Is being helpful to those who really need it

Is taking the rubbish out for someone

Kindliness

Is a cup of tea with a friend
Is giving someone a lift
Is helping a disabled person across the road
when there isn't a car coming

Kindliness

Is an unexpected gift from someone you love
Is lending an ear
Is when my husband finally screwed the toilet to the floor
after eight years

Kindliness

Is doing something for somebody
And not moaning about it afterwards

Kindliness

Is a surprise birthday cake with a picture of my cow on it
Is taking someone out to lunch
Is holding open a door for someone with a walking frame

Kindliness

Is being taken care of when you are ill
Is taking the dog for a walk
Is when someone does your shopping because you can't

Kindliness

Is collecting Rose's pills
Is taking you to hospital in an emergency

Kindliness

Is happiness in a close community
Is being a good neighbour
Is joy and long-suffering and making someone smile

Kindliness is addictive and contagious
Kindliness is the vet writing a lovely sympathy card
when my house bunny died.
(The bill followed in the next post)

Note

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Housing Learning and Improvement Network.

About the Housing LIN

The Housing LIN is a sophisticated network bringing together over 40,000 housing, health and social care professionals in England and Wales to exemplify innovative housing solutions for an ageing population.

Recognised by government and industry as a leading 'knowledge hub' on specialist housing, our online and regional networked activities:

- connect people, ideas and resources to inform and improve the range of housing choices that enable older and disabled people to live independently
- provide intelligence on latest funding, research, policy and practice developments, and
- raise the profile of specialist housing with developers, commissioners and providers to plan, design and deliver aspirational housing for an ageing population.

To access more information about sheltered housing on the Housing LIN website, visit:

<https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/browse/Housing/HousingforOlderPeople/ShelteredHousing/>

and for examples of transformative coproduction and community involvement, go to:

<https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/browse/CareAndSupportatHome/Co-productionAndCommunities/>

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