

Unlocking Potential, Transforming Lives

An Evaluation of Crisis SmartSkills, a Personalised Accredited Learning Programme

November 2009

This research explores the difference that seven SmartSkills projects around the UK made to people with experiences of homelessness. Between February and July 2009 independent researchers conducted an evaluation of SmartSkills and explored the benefits for both clients and organisations of delivering housing and personalised learning support together. This summary highlights the key findings from the review and possibilities for future development.

Key findings

- Participation in the programme substantively enhanced individuals' self-esteem and life skills. The model acted as an effective bridge to further learning for many otherwise 'hard to reach' learners. There appear to be genuine benefits in bringing housing support and learning support together; and the better integrated these are, the greater the service impact seems to be.
- Engagement in structured learning gave a new meaning and purpose to learners' lives as they started to have goals and work towards them, and make plans for the future. As positive changes began to happen, individuals began to feel that other, bigger changes might also be possible.
- Learners who reported the most life changing impact were often former substance misusers. Whereas all learners interviewed gained at least one benefit from engagement, this group of learners was notable due to the multiple benefits that they experienced. The one-to-one support, the structure and routine provided by the learning framework, and the chance to develop or regain confidence and self-esteem was particularly valued. The reductions in substance misuse that learners achieved alongside increased self-respect also seemed to impact beneficially on their propensity to engage in crime and antisocial behaviour.
- A considerable number of learners progressed onto further education, or adult learning after or during engagement with SmartSkills. Between a third and a half of SmartSkills learners progressed onto more formal learning. Many learners commented on how engagement in SmartSkills had enabled them to build the confidence to participate in a more formal learning environment – something they would not have regarded as possible before.
- Engagement in SmartSkills had a positive impact on independent living skills linked to tenancy sustainment. Wider research has established links between tenancy failure and some of the needs which SmartSkills addressed, such as social isolation, poor financial management, anti-social behaviour, and substance misuse.
- The benefit of rebuilding family ties was the most significant impact of SmartSkills for some participants. Women in particular reported better relationships with their families – including increased contact with their children.

- Relatively few learners progressed onto paid employment during the period evaluated – hardly surprising given the multiple barriers to employment they faced. However, it was clear that at the same time as addressing these barriers they were acquiring skills valued by employers. As well as functional skills, such as IT or literacy skills, this also included ‘soft skills’ such as confidence and self-esteem, communications skills, the ability to work in teams, and set goals and organise workload.
- Volunteering opportunities were very popular with learners, who often saw them as a more realistic first step towards employment. The success in engaging learners in volunteering suggests that providing such opportunities should be an important part of any service which aims to improve employability and/or engagement in positive activity; address social isolation; or improve confidence and self-esteem.

‘If anyone had mentioned college to me before I would have laughed!’

Background

The aim of the SmartSkills programme was to deliver person-centred accredited learning alongside access to private rented accommodation; a reflection of Crisis’ belief that learning is an integral part of helping people who are homeless rebuild their lives and move away from homelessness permanently. The importance of learning as a means to tackle homelessness is reflected in the Government’s latest rough sleeping strategy:

‘Raising people’s skills can be the key to them moving permanently off the streets. This might be the practical skills needed to look after a tenancy, the ‘soft skills’ such as managing time or working in teams or the skills that people need to find and keep a job. Involvement in activity that builds people’s skills can also build their confidence, motivation and aspiration for the future.’¹

In establishing the SmartSkills programme, Crisis initially invited bids from organisations operating a SmartMove deposit guarantee service to pilot this new service.

‘My life is in such a better place. I have kicked drugs. I’ve got rid of my eating disorder. I’m really healthy. It has given me ambition and more self-worth.’

Successful bidders were provided with funding for a SmartSkills worker to provide learning support for people engaged with the scheme, and were required to deliver ‘accredited life skills coaching’ to twenty learners per year using accredited learning frameworks (one of the two City and Guilds qualification were required: the Profile of Achievement or the Learn Power award).

The seven pilot sites were located in: Barnet, Bridgend, Calderdale, Canterbury, Edinburgh, Swansea and Teesside. In terms of overall levels of engagement across all seven sites, between July 2008 and June 2009 (the third year of the programme):

- 220 people participated in SmartSkills
- 79 completed the Profile of Achievement or Learn Power Awards
- 58 people moved on into further education
- A total of 367 modules/qualifications were achieved between all learners
- 19 moved into employment

SmartSkills appealed to men and women from a broad range of backgrounds and ages. The complexity of needs of those using the service varied across the pilot sites. Some schemes specifically worked with learners with complex needs, including drug and alcohol misuse, a history of abuse or violence, and mental ill health.

The SmartSkills model

Whilst the exact nature of delivery varied from site to site, there are a number of key features that were present at all sites and which contributed to its success.

Learning methods

- The SmartSkills learning framework is a strengths-based model. It builds on the existing strengths of the individual to grow and develop (as opposed to traditional ‘deficit’ approaches which tend to focus on trying to ‘fix’ weaknesses).

¹ Communities and Local Government (2008), *No One Left Out: Communities Ending Rough Sleeping*. CLG: London.

- It offers accredited learning which can be adapted to the specific interests and learning needs of the individual – breaks the learning into bite sized achievable goals which will deliver regular achievement along the way to any final qualification, keeps people motivated to achieve their goals and minimised drop out rates. For many the possibility of achieving an accredited qualification was an important and motivating factor.
- All schemes combine group based and one-to-one learning. Group learning and activities were highly valued by people who were lonely or socially isolated, and wanted to broaden their social networks and social skills. Yet, for some group learning was a ‘step too far’ at the outset, particularly those with poor self-esteem and whose motivation to engage might otherwise be low.

Staffing

- Worker/learner ratios are low and enable personalised support (1:5 is the norm in SmartSkills projects). Individualised support enabled workers to tailor learning to the specific interests and capabilities of the learner, and was particularly beneficial for those with low confidence or poor self-esteem (especially people with complex needs and/or those who were or had been substance misusers).
- The SmartSkills worker had to create an environment of trust and openness with the learner. In order to do so, it was found that the SmartSkills worker needed the right kind of personality - empathy, friendliness and approachability, reliability and consistency, acceptance, strong listening skills, patience, tolerance and the ability to withhold judgement.

‘Now I’m meeting people through things I’m really interested in, not through cocaine, and feel there’s sincerity in my friendships, instead of feeling used.’

Case Study – Nadir

Nadir was discharged from prison and became homeless, depressed and suicidal. He was in poor physical and mental shape and was taking a wide range of drugs (crack, heroin, ecstasy, etc.). He was full of anger and hate – for himself and for others – and was self-harming. He felt hopeless and lacking in confidence.

When asked by his SmartMove worker whether he wanted to get an education, Nadir’s reply was ‘yes’. He was interested in improving his IT, communication and writing skills. But it was also a time in his life when he wanted to change.

Prior to engagement he had lost his ‘humanity, respect and confidence’. He says that learning helps to pull people out of that place. Nadir clearly felt that his relationship with the SmartSkills worker had been critical, and he described her as the person who had given him hope, interest and enthusiasm.

He has now returned to college to do a vocational course, and said he is preparing himself for work. His desire to turn his back on drugs has also lost him friends however, as he wanted to be away from the negative influences of those he used to associate with. Coping with the loneliness that brings is still a challenge for Nadir. Nadir finds that focusing on learning helps him to manage his anger. He says that if he hadn’t begun SmartSkills he ‘would definitely have gone to prison – for a long time’.

Recruitment and retaining learners

- At all sites, a proactive approach to recruiting learners was said to be important if not essential. Instances of people dropping out from the programme appear to have been relatively rare, suggesting that the model is good at retaining learners once engaged.
- Taking time to build up the potential learner’s confidence, and establish some level of trust and positive regard between the worker and the learner, was crucial for recruiting and retaining the more vulnerable learners.

Issues	Recommendations
<p>Delivering learning services for people with complex needs</p>	<p>Target client group: it was a sub-set rather than all SmartMove clients who wanted to take up the learning offer. Those who gained the most were people with multiple needs and vulnerabilities, with the pilots meeting a significant gap in services for these sub-groups of the homeless population. People with backgrounds of multiple exclusion and homelessness are much less likely to move straight into pre-employment services and training. The SmartSkills model fills a gap in helping people become more ‘job ready’.</p> <p>Learning frameworks and accreditation models: accreditation was important to many of the learners. Further development or replication of the model should seek to incorporate accredited learning where possible. Whatever qualification providers select it is of vital importance that it is flexible so that it can be tailored to the individual learners’ interests and personal development needs.</p>
<p>Integrating learning and housing</p>	<p>Using a strengths-based approach: many homelessness agencies now offer learning opportunities, but this tends to be as a ‘bolt-on’ to their core business delivered by specialist staff who take referrals from housing support staff. The strengths-based approach used in the learning support provided by SmartSkills, contrasts with the deficit model (typically used in housing support) which attempts to identify the ‘problems’ and ‘needs’ of the client. There is potentially a case, however, for implementing a strengths-based approach more systemically across the whole workforce, including the housing support staff. One SmartSkills pilot had done this, with success.</p> <p>Delivery partnership: the evaluation findings suggest that with the right infrastructure in place, this model of learning support could be effective in other settings, including: hostels, day centres, alongside detoxification services and in supported or even general needs housing. A partnership across organisations working with people who are homeless could potentially achieve the critical mass needed to secure long-term funding as well as a more effective organisational infrastructure.</p>
<p>Making the offer work and funding</p>	<p>Staffing and organisational structure: SmartSkills was often delivered by lone workers. Even though network support existed through Crisis, this nevertheless raised some challenges in relation to the intensity of the learning support relationship and the need for appropriate supervision, line management and peer support. In replicating the model it will be important to create a more substantive organisational infrastructure to address factors such as maintaining staff continuity, managing impact measurement and delivery of partnership relationships, and providing adequate supervision. A partnership across organisations could help with this.</p> <p>Funding arrangements: Crisis estimates that Learning and Skills Council funding makes up less than half of the costs of delivering a Learn Power Qualification and even this funding is now under threat. It will, therefore, be important to put in place realistic packages of funding which cover all costs including: the costs of measuring impact; convening and supporting any delivery partnership; and providing effective supervision and management support. Local Area Agreements which bring together a number of different funding sources across health, housing, social care and employment/training offer one potential route for this.</p> <p>Demonstrating impact: providers should develop rigorous and systematic monitoring and evaluation arrangements so as to build a quantitative as well as qualitative evidence base of impact. Ideally this should include: development of a baseline data set from which to measure ‘distance travelled’ by each learner; use of comparative data; measurement of short, medium and longer term outcomes; and linking of costs to outcomes to enable cost/benefit analysis.</p>

Conclusions and learning points

The SmartSkills pilot programme has demonstrated that through the introduction of a strengths-based learning programme, the life skills, self-esteem and life chances of learners can all be enhanced. This is a service delivery option that 'works' and is replicable. As such, there are a number of learning points from this evaluation that will be of interest and value to a range of audiences, particularly policy makers, potential funders and service providers interested in incorporating learning and personal development into their work.

'It's about getting people through that barrier of not feeling human, to someone who has prospects... starting to think that things are possible.'

About this project

The research was undertaken by Jane Luby and Jackie Gallagher from February to July 2009.

The methodology included visits to the SmartSkills staff, interviews with 39 service users and other stakeholders, together with a desk top review of performance data and other relevant research.

For more information

The full report, *Unlocking potential, transforming lives*, by Jane Luby and Jackie Gallagher, is published by Crisis. A manual on how to develop and manage a SmartSkills project has also been developed by Crisis.

Both the report and the manual are available as a free download from www.crisis.org.uk

Case Study – Susie

Susie is a young woman who had extended and traumatic childhood experiences of abuse, and has subsequently been in relationships in which she has been the victim of extreme violence. As a result of the abuse she began drinking heavily, and social services became involved with the care of her children, they referred Susie to floating support and as a result she was offered the SmartSkills programme.

"[SmartSkills worker] gives me something to cling to. She stops me feeling so hopeless and offers me positive solutions. Even when things are very bad she still encourages me and makes me realise I'm not going to stay stuck where I am - there's still hope and possibility for my life."

Susie has reduced her drinking significantly in order to have access to her children, works part time and volunteers regularly at a local project. She has completed her Profile of Achievement, undertaken courses at college and is now getting involved in an arts project (a spin off from one of the college courses she took). Susie is very motivated to rebuild her life in order to have greater access to her children. She understands that to care for them properly she needs to get her life back on track and is now participating in a programme run by Women's Aid for women who have experienced domestic abuse. She feels that none of this would have been possible without SmartSkills:

"I was so lost, I didn't think I could do anything – it gave me new possibilities and it felt like doors were being opened for me."

About Crisis

Crisis is the national charity for single homeless people. We are dedicated to ending homelessness by delivering life-changing services and campaigning for change.

Our innovative education, employment, housing and well-being services address individual needs and help people to transform their lives. We measure our success and can demonstrate tangible results and value for money.

We are determined campaigners, working to prevent people from becoming homeless and advocating solutions informed by research and our direct experience.

We have ambitious plans for the future and are committed to help more people in more places across the UK. We know we won't end homelessness overnight or on our own. But we take a lead, collaborate with others and together make change happen.

About Jane Luby and Jackie Gallagher

Jane and Jackie are highly experienced consultants, researchers and project managers, with particular experience in the fields of housing, homelessness, health, social care and worklessness.

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