

Unlocking Potential, Transforming Lives:

An Evaluation of Crisis SmartSkills, a Personalised Accredited Learning Programme

Jane Luby and Jackie Gallagher
November 2009



Crisis

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.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose and Coverage of the Evaluation

'SmartSkills' is the name given by Crisis to a model of working which delivers personalised support for learning alongside access to private rented accommodation for homeless people.

In February 2009 Crisis commissioned independent researchers to conduct an evaluation of SmartSkills. It asked the researchers to identify the outcomes of engagement in SmartSkills for individual learners, and to evaluate the success (or otherwise) of the programme in delivering person-centred learning alongside access to accommodation in the private rented sector and its impact on:

- confidence and self-esteem;
- aspirations and goals, together with progress towards these;
- engagement and sustainment of further education, training, or employment;
- participation in society and social networks;
- navigation and use of services; and
- self-efficacy and avoidance of future homelessness.

1.2 The SmartSkills Model

There are seven SmartSkills projects located across the UK,¹ located within and as part of services providing access to accommodation in the private rented sector for single people who are homeless (SmartMove schemes). Each one employs at least one dedicated SmartSkills worker who provides learning support to people who have also sought help with their housing.

The learning support is generally delivered through a combination of one-to-one and group based support, although the balance between the two varies across the different projects. The support is primarily targeted towards achievement of an accredited City and Guilds qualification, either the Profile of Achievement or Learn Power award. Both qualifications can be used with people with a range of existing skills, and can be tailored to the particular learning needs and interests of the individual. Similarly, both awards can be used to give credit for learning linked to self development as well as more traditional learning. For instance, learning about personal strengths and weaknesses, how to cope with conflict or change, and learning to interact successfully with others.

Whilst conceived by Crisis, both SmartMove and SmartSkills are provided on a franchise basis by other voluntary sector organisations. SmartMove schemes are now

¹ Barnet, Bridgend, Calderdale, Canterbury, Edinburgh, Swansea, and Teesside.

largely financially independent of Crisis, but funding was available for SmartSkills from Crisis to enable this new approach to be piloted.

1.3 Methodology for the Evaluation

The researchers visited six of the seven SmartSkills projects, and carried out fieldwork by telephone at the seventh, to interview staff and learners and learn about the physical and operational context within which the learning support is delivered. A total of 39 interviews were undertaken with learners across the six sites visited, all but one of which were face to face interviews. 16 staff were interviewed (frontline workers and managers) across the seven sites.

Interviews were also undertaken with local stakeholders able to comment on the operation, strengths and weaknesses of the SmartSkills work. This included, for instance, supported housing providers which work alongside SmartMove/SmartSkills to deliver services to learners, and colleges operating as the accrediting body for the qualifications.

Local performance data and 25 learning portfolios were scrutinised to gain a picture of the numbers and characteristics of learners engaging with SmartSkills at each site, the coverage of their learning, and the outcomes achieved.

In order to place the activities and outcomes from the programme in a wider national context, a literature review was carried out focused on national strategic and investment priorities. This included, for instance, a review of national policy and priorities for adult learning and homelessness.

A rapid review of good practice in the delivery of personalised support for vulnerable people was also undertaken drawing from the fields of positive psychology, life coaching, homelessness, social exclusion and social care.

1.4 About this report

This report sets out the findings from the evaluation.

Section Two provides more information about the history and background to the establishment of the SmartSkills programme, why Crisis decided to fund these pilots and how the pilots were chosen and set up, and a short description of each of the pilot sites.

Section Three evaluates the impacts reported by and recorded for individual learners, as well as the organisations delivering the model, and discusses relative costs/benefits in relation to national strategic priorities.

Section Four evaluates the SmartSkills service model and its suitability for achieving the desired aims.

Section Five draws conclusions from the evaluation and sets out recommendations for national, regional and local funders, strategic leaders and service providers.

2. History and Background of SmartSkills

2.1 Providing Routes out of Homelessness

Crisis is the national charity for single homeless people. Its purpose is to prevent homelessness, and transform lives to end the risk of homelessness. It does this through a combination of campaigning and delivering services – either directly or in partnership with others. It prides itself on developing innovative services through research and consultation with homeless people, and collaborating with others in the sector to achieve effective models of practice.

Outside the homelessness sector Crisis is most often known for its work in providing shelter and services for homeless people at Christmas. However, in 2002 Crisis re-orientated its work away from ‘survival services’ towards opportunities for homeless people to rebuild their lives. Its services now include:

- **Skylight centres:** education, training and employment centres in London and Newcastle (soon also in Oxford and Birmingham) for homeless and vulnerably housed people. Each centre includes a Skylight Café, social enterprises and art spaces that provides on the job training and experience for homeless people and ex-offenders.
- **Crisis Employment Services:** a dedicated employment team, which helps homeless people to prepare for, find and keep jobs.
- **Crisis Changing Lives:** a national grant scheme which helps homeless people achieve their education and career goals by giving people the opportunity to apply for funding for tuition fees, tools and other costs, thus helping them reintegrate back into the world of work or learning.
- **Crisis SmartMove:** a best practice model for deposit schemes which is delivered by local agencies under license from Crisis. The SmartMove network has enabled single homeless people who are not a priority for housing under homelessness legislation to access accommodation in the private rented sector. Twenty eight organisations across the UK now help over 1,000 people every year into accommodation under the SmartMove banner.
- **Crisis Private Renting and Housing Team:** the national advisory body for over 250 private rented sector access schemes, and which supports their development through training, advisory work and events.

This shift to a broader range of services has been prompted by recognition that housing is just one part of what is required to address the disadvantage and social exclusion experienced by people who are homeless. Crisis’ strategic priorities are now focused on providing clear progression routes out of homelessness built upon engagement, education, employment and empowerment, and the elimination of barriers that can prevent homeless people achieving rewarding lives within mainstream society.

2.2 The Importance of Learning and Skills

In 2006, Crisis commissioned research into the levels of engagement of homeless people in learning and skills and their aspirations to do so. That research found that more than half of people want to engage in learning, but that less than a fifth do so.² Earlier research had established that over three quarters (77 per cent) of homeless people want to work immediately, and almost all wanted to work in the future.³

Other research, also commissioned by Crisis, highlighted how participation in learning and skills can transform the lives of individuals who are homeless, at the same time as delivering important social and financial benefits for a wide variety of Government policies and programmes. It noted the multiple needs of homeless people, for instance high levels of worklessness, substance misuse, mental ill health, and physical illness or disability, which can act as barriers to work and learning. However, since engagement in learning and skills development can impact positively on many of these needs, the range of potential benefits is greatly increased for this group, and might for instance include: improved mental health, reduced drug use or offending; and improved confidence, skills and motivation to engage in work or learning.⁴

These arguments are now well accepted by Communities and Local Government, the Government department responsible for rough sleeping strategy:

“We want to increase opportunities for people moving away from rough sleeping to take part in activities that give hope, build skills, increase confidence and self-esteem and above all strengthen positive relationships. ... 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.”⁵

However, as the research concluded, the fact that potential benefits are spread across a number of public agendas, rather than concentrated in the areas prioritised by adult education funders, can mean that the chances of funding are reduced.⁶

2.3 Aims and Implementation of SmartSkills

The primary aim of the SmartSkills programme was to develop a replicable model which would enable SmartMove schemes (and potentially other housing providers for single homeless people) to promote learning opportunities to their clients. Crisis aimed to use the existing relationship between the SmartMove project workers and their clients to build ‘bridges’ to more formal learning opportunities. The objectives were:

² Opinion leader (2006), *Homeless People and Learning and Skills*. Crisis: London.

³ P. Singh (2005), *No home, no job: moving on from transitional spaces*. OSW: London.

⁴ J. Luby and J. Welsh (2006), *Missed Opportunities: The Case for Investment in Learning and Skills for Homeless People*. Crisis: London.

⁵ CLG (2008), *No-One Left Out: communities ending rough sleeping*. London.

⁶ J. Luby and J. Welsh (2006), *Missed Opportunities*. Crisis: London.

- To build the life skills and self-esteem of SmartMove tenants in order to better enable them to sustain their tenancies and ‘move-on’ in their lives away from homelessness (and the problems and issues associated with it);
- To develop a replicable model that could be rolled out to the wider SmartMove network through building the capacity of existing service providers; and
- To investigate, and where possible access, alternative continuation funding.

Crisis set aside funding for the SmartSkills model to be piloted from 2004 onwards, and invited bids from 27 SmartMove schemes. Only two of the six bids received were successful (Swansea and Teesside). A further bidding round in May 2005 saw two further successful bids (Barnet and Canterbury). In 2006 two previously unsuccessful applicants (Edinburgh and Calderdale SmartMove) were invited to participate in a further roll-out, and Swansea and Teesside were given increased funding for a second worker (which resulted in a new project being set up in Bridgend).

The original offer of £18,000 per annum for each successful bidder was increased to £30,000 to enable the recruitment of a dedicated SmartSkills worker at each site.

Successful bidders were required to deliver ‘accredited life skills coaching’ to 20 learners per year, with a target of 15 achieving the qualification. The accreditation frameworks promoted by Crisis were two City and Guilds Qualifications: the Profile of Achievement and Learn Power awards. Examples of the modules that can be covered by each qualification are shown below (also see section 4.4).

Figure 1: Examples of Learning Modules

Learn Power	Profile of Achievement
Me and my learning	Literacy and communication
Handling my own money	Numeracy and budgeting
How I feel and want to feel	Caring for myself
Coping with change	Caring for others
Being healthy	Working in a team
What I do and what I want to do	Being creative
Solving problems	Confidence and independence
Coping with changes in me	Showing social awareness

Crisis hosted bi-annual network meetings which gave the SmartSkills workers at each of the pilot sites the opportunity to meet up, share approaches and learning, and give each other mutual support.

In 2007, Crisis introduced additional funding (£50 per learner) for incidental expenses, such as travel, books, course fees, trips associated with learning, or even financial rewards for achievement. Crisis also funded guidance and support to the pilot sites to enable them to develop their funding strategies from 2009 onwards.

Whilst Crisis required quarterly recording of engagement and outcomes at each site, actual recording practices varied, and the format used does not easily lend itself to quantitative analysis of outcomes. However, figures available for the 12 month period July 2008 – June 2009 show the following overall levels of engagement across all seven sites:

- Number of individuals participating in SmartSkills: 220
- Number of participants completing the Profile of Achievement or Learn Power awards: 79
- Number people moving into further education: 58
- Total number of modules/qualifications achieved by learners: 367

2.4 The Pilot Sites

A full description of the pilot sites is provided in appendix 1. However, a short description is provided below as context for the evaluation findings.

Teesside

Teesside Homeless Action Group (THAG) is a small charity working with homeless people of all ages and with a wide range of needs, including rough sleepers.

The qualifications framework used is the Learn Power award, with Stockton Riverside College playing the role of the accrediting body. Learning support is largely delivered on a one-to-one basis, although groups of learners get together for trips out and for cooking sessions.

Around 40 learners per year have engaged with SmartSkills (approximately 20 per worker). This represents around 40 per cent of SmartMove clients. Performance data suggests the following outcomes:

- 40 per cent of learners progress onto more formal adult learning;
- 25 per cent progress to employment; and
- 25 per cent begin volunteering.

Both SmartSkills workers had a background in providing employment or educational support to vulnerable people prior to take up of their current role.

Wales: Swansea and Bridgend

The Wallich provides a broad spectrum of services to homeless people and has over 30 projects across 15 of Wales' 22 local authorities.

Workers at both sites work predominantly with learners on a one-to-one basis, but also provide some group based learning and support. Both pilots work with homeless people with a great deal of vulnerability, including substance misuse and mental illness. However, learners in Bridgend tend to have more complex needs, including women who have been victims of either childhood abuse, domestic abuse or both.

The Wallich is now a City and Guild Centre in its own right (using the Profile of Achievement framework) and employs a Head of Learning who leads on all client and staff learning across its projects. Both SmartSkills workers are working towards NVQs in Advice and Guidance, and staff across the organisation have been trained in a Solution Focused Development approach.

SmartSkills is typically working with about 20 per cent of overall clients. Performance data suggests that:

- Around 25 per cent of learners progress to employment; and
- Over 50 per cent progress to further education in the short term.

Barnet

Barnet SmartSkills is part of Threshold Housing Advice, which runs rent deposit schemes for non-statutory homeless clients (SmartMove) and drug users (Foundation project). SmartSkills is targeted at the latter group.

The Foundation Project works with around 150 people per year, of whom around 13 per cent engage with SmartSkills. The SmartSkills worker has a caseload of around five clients at any one time.

The qualifications framework used in Barnet is the Learn Power award. Learning support is largely delivered on a one-to-one basis, although groups of learners come together for occasional trips out and for weekly yoga and relaxation sessions. Yoga sessions have also been possible due to the skills and interests of the SmartSkills worker in this aspect of learning.

Performance data suggests the following outcomes:

- 75 per cent gain the Learn Power award;
- Around 40 per cent progress onto more formal adult learning;
- A third begin volunteering; and
- Just under 20 per cent gain employment or become self-employed.

The SmartSkills worker has a background in supporting vulnerable people to engage in education and skills development. Whilst working for SmartSkills she has also undertaken training as a counsellor and receives external supervision for this aspect of her work.

Canterbury

Canterbury experienced major difficulties with securing an accrediting body, which took a year to resolve, and Crisis now acts as the accrediting body.

SmartSkills is 'hosted' by Canterbury Housing Advice Centre, although few referrals come through this route. Most referrals come through the Scrine Foundation, a local homelessness charity which provides hostel and direct access accommodation in Canterbury.

Canterbury predominantly delivers its support through a group rather than one-to-one learning format (although one-to-one support is also provided). Modules are delivered in three regular sessions throughout the week, and are selected by the worker based on the expressed interests, wishes and needs of the individual learners within each group.

The caseload pattern is typically five people participating in the group learning, with three other people receiving individual support. In 2008, the pilot supported approximately 20 people, including 12 learners who completed their award.

Performance data suggests that:

- Around a third of learners progress to further education; and
- 40 per cent begin volunteering or actively seeking voluntary work.

Calderdale

For the last 10 years, Calderdale SmartMove has operated primarily as a private sector access scheme for single homeless people.

At the beginning of SmartSkills, it struggled to recruit learners, had problems finding a college willing to undertake accreditation (which meant qualifications could not be delivered for some time), and had turnover of key staff.

These initial problems have now been ironed out, and SmartSkills is being delivered in partnership with a local foyer service. A structured course has been developed using prescribed Learn Power modules, which combines group learning with on-to-one support, and which is delivered over a nine week period. Crisis now operates as the accreditation body.

Performance data suggests that between 10 and 20 learners have engaged each year.

Whilst achievement of the Learn Power award or progression to employment has been low to date, a high proportion of recent learners have progressed onto further education or volunteering.

Edinburgh

Edinburgh Cyrenians has delivered SmartSkills in Edinburgh and West Lothian, and more recently in Falkirk due to a loss of funding for its private sector access scheme in Edinburgh. Stevenson's College provides accreditation.

There have also been a number of changes in the staffing arrangements which have affected continuity and the recruitment of learners. There have also been difficulties throughout in recruiting learners, but this has recently improved.

All the support is delivered in a one-to-one situation. However, staff generally work with individuals in their own homes rather than at a central location.

Most of the learners participating are lonely, isolated, often depressed, with low self esteem and motivation, relationship difficulties and low confidence. No one has overt substance misuse or serious mental health problems, although these do not in principle prevent access to the project, as people with such support needs are the Cyrenians' primary client group.

Around ten learners are expected to achieve their award this year. Performance data suggests that over 50 per cent of all learners progress to further education or employment.

3. Evaluation of impacts

3.1 Who engaged and why

The age and ethnicity of learners was not systematically recorded by all pilot sites. However, interviews with learners suggest that the service was attractive to people from a broad range of backgrounds and ages. A comparison of the gender of learners with that of people using the organisation's SmartMove or other referring housing service suggests that, whilst there was some variation across sites (ranging from 15 per cent women at one site to 66 per cent at another) and from year to year, the proportion of men and women engaging with SmartSkills was broadly similar to proportions within the wider client group of the host organisation.

Although there were no specific eligibility criteria in place at any of the pilot sites, the SmartSkills workers and their colleagues often exercised some informal targeting towards people who were relatively stable, but who were nevertheless at some risk of tenancy breakdown and repeat homelessness. Two of the sites mentioned that they would be unlikely to encourage participation in SmartSkills by people whose homelessness was a result of 'bad luck' (e.g., relationship breakdown that was not linked to other needs) which was not perceived to be an indicator of potential ongoing vulnerability. Current or recent substance misuse was not seen as a bar to engagement, provided the learner was relatively stable and was thought to have sufficient motivation to engage on an ongoing basis.

The majority of SmartSkills workers identified the programme's ability to work flexibly with vulnerable people often with complex needs, and adjust (and readjust) the pace according to each individual's current capacity, as a core strength of SmartSkills, and a defining characteristic which differentiates it from other support services.

When asked about their reasons for engagement with SmartSkills and what they had hoped to achieve from it, the most common reason quoted by learners was to have something to do other than sit indoors watching TV. Their comments often gave a palpable sense of boredom, social isolation and lack of daily purpose.

"I wanted to wake up and do something rather than sit watching TV. I wanted to keep occupied and have something to look forward to."

"I wanted to meet new people and not be stuck in a flat, staring at four walls."

"I wanted structure – to be doing something regularly. I was stuck indoors."

"I wanted something to occupy myself to keep me off the drink. That's why I got involved."

A significant proportion saw engagement in SmartSkills as a turning point in their lives, and said they had become engaged in order to mark or assist with that change towards a new life. This was particularly the case for people who had recently given up, or were hoping to give up drugs or alcohol.

“It was a new beginning for me.”

“You come out of the darkness and start seeing the light.”

Other commonly quoted reasons were:

- To improve reading or writing skills;
- To develop or improve IT skills; and
- To meet new people (where group learning was in place).

The approaches used to market SmartSkills to potential learners seemed to have a significant impact on take up. None of the sites relied on marketing via posters or leaflets, instead using staff to ‘sell’ the benefits of SmartSkills: At most sites the SmartMove workers were expected to make the initial ‘sales pitch’ to the clients they were working with, and then refer onto the SmartSkills worker if interest was expressed, although the way this worked in practice seemed to vary considerably across the different sites.

Where there was close working relationship between the SmartSkills workers and other staff of the ‘host’ organisation, this appeared to result in a much more integrated approach which both enhanced take up and reduced the attrition rate considerably:

“If a potential learner is interested, but not quite ready yet because of all the other pressures involved in the move, I know [the SmartMove worker] will let me know when the time is right and we can restart the process then. This means we can be really flexible in responding to the stresses people face, and ‘hold’ them while they get through, so they don’t experience it as another failure to complete something.”

Some SmartSkills workers said that the SmartMove workers did not always promote SmartSkills to their clients as well as they would have hoped. In one service, where SmartSkills workers also carry out some housing assessment interviews and therefore do the initial promotion of the learning support service, the level of engagement was said to double in those cases.

In two of the pilots, the primary referral source was no longer colleagues in the host organisation and another agency had become the primary referral agency. In both these examples, however, the pilot site had built a collaborative relationship with the new referring organisation. This meant that the SmartSkills worker had similarly close day to day working relationships with the relevant staff in that organisation as those described in more integrated SmartMove/SmartSkills arrangements.

3.2 The engagement process

At all sites, a proactive approach to recruitment was said to be important if not essential. Because such a high proportion of the learners who go on to engage with SmartSkills have very poor confidence and low self esteem, this can create a barrier to them even conceiving it possible that they can participate in such a programme. The proactive yet sensitive approach to recruitment taken by all of the pilots seems to work well. It is founded in a respect for the pace at which the learner can begin to imagine herself or himself getting involved. Following the initial referral, the recruitment

process often involves a number of very low key and informal contacts. When engaging with the most vulnerable learners, this process seems to have a number of important common elements across all schemes:

- A process of trust building during which both the worker and learner develop a picture and a sense of each other. The worker also helps the learner begin to explore her/his interests and wishes for self development – some of which may not have previously been consciously identified or acknowledged;
- The very early stages of creating a safe emotional space in which the learner might begin to picture or imagine new options and possibilities for her or his future as real and achievable; and
- The beginnings of thinking about and taking risks in a radically new way. Risks which might bring with them life enhancing possibilities, rather than risks taken (substance misuse, self harm, etc.) to defend against and deaden the distress caused by past life experiences which have been painful and destructive.

The process of engaging this sub group of the most vulnerable learners within each SmartSkills cohort was one of the most challenging aspects of the delivery model. Much depended on the worker having the personal characteristics and skills to develop empathy with the new learner's life experiences and perspectives. And his or her ability to create an environment of trust and openness in which the learner could feel confident the worker would provide support which was reliable, consistent and secure, but which also had clear boundaries for the successful management of the relationship during the programme.

Not all learners needed this more nuanced engagement process to attract them to the programme. However, for those learners with a clearer sense of their own personal development needs, the flexibility of the learning framework also seemed to be particularly attractive.

The flexibility of the learning framework enabled it to be moulded around the specific interests of most learners. Some SmartSkills workers were particularly adept at doing this so that the programme operated in such a way that meant:

- People with clear goals and objectives could work at their own pace, fitting it around other commitments and priorities, and developing and building on new interests as they emerged; and
- People with more complex needs and less aware of their own development needs could use the learning framework itself to explore for themselves what their needs might be, as a key bridging step to being able to even think about and create realistic life goals and objectives.

For instance, some learners were not aware that they had been completing modules focused on self-development, describing instead how they had been learning IT skills or improving their literacy, but also described how illuminating the experience had been because at the same time they had been finding things out about themselves

and their own potential which had been unknown to them before.

The 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. Where learners did drop out, this appears to have been related to the wider needs of the individual learner (such as a return to heavy drug use, or imprisonment) rather than a reflection of the learning and related support offered.

3.3 Progression to further education

Whilst only a minority of learners overall succeeded in completing all five modules required for an accredited qualification, a high proportion progressed onto further education or adult learning after or during engagement with SmartSkills.

Many learners commented on how engagement in SmartSkills had enabled them to build the confidence to participate in a more formal learning environment.

Several learners had progressed onto university, and others enrolled onto a range of further vocational and non-vocational learning. Examples include: alternative therapy skills (for instance, yoga and reflexology); information technology; beauty therapy; foreign languages; construction or maintenance qualifications; health and social care qualifications. For many this would have been unthinkable before engagement with SmartSkills because of their lack of confidence in their abilities, or unease in social groups.

“If anyone had mentioned college to me before I would have laughed!”

“I wouldn’t have had the confidence to go on a course, because I thought I looked like a drug addict.”

Progression to literacy or numeracy courses was particularly common, with needs in both areas recorded for a high proportion of learners. One site estimated that more than 40 per cent of its learners had dyslexia, for instance. In another service, more than eight out of ten learners studied modules which included coverage of literacy and numeracy. National research has previously found that 19 per cent of single homeless people have difficulties reading and writing, compared to only 2-3 per cent of general population.⁷ However, these needs can often remain hidden due to embarrassment and shame felt by the individual.

For some individuals, engagement in SmartSkills clearly represented a critical juncture in their lives, and something that had awakened a love of learning which they may not have previously possessed or which had been long forgotten. An example of this is illustrated by the case study below.

⁷ ODPM (2005), *Key findings from the Supporting People Baseline User Survey*. ODPM: London

Case Study – Luke⁸

Luke has been involved with SmartSkills for only four months, but it is already having a significant impact on his life. He was told about the opportunity to engage in learning with SmartSkills through staff at the hostel in which he lives, and it was this that interested him rather than the opportunity to get a flat.

Luke said that he very quickly ‘got into’ the learning and developed a thirst for it. It made him realise what he has already done in his life – such as looking after himself and siblings from an early age - and recognise those things as achievements.

He realises now that he has always had academic ability, but in the past he thinks he has ‘dumbed down’ to fit in – doing manual work which he never really liked, for instance, and adapting his vocabulary to fit in with the expectations of others.

Whilst Luke had always had some level of confidence, this was eroded by drug misuse.

“Before I used to think I was useless; other people told me I was useless. I was stuck in a rut. I used to make excuses so I wouldn’t have to change. Nothing was as important as getting wrecked.... I was numb from the drugs.”

He has just completed one level of the qualification and is thinking about progressing to the next level. He enjoyed the discipline of the learning framework and having goals and tasks to do.

Luke has now enrolled on a taster course at university. But before getting involved in SmartSkills he would not have felt able to learn in a group. He said it would have made him feel ‘thick’. Luke feels much happier with who he is now, and can get pleasure from the ‘little things’ in life. He no longer wants a ‘flash car’ for instance, but sees that other things will make him happy. He also said he is less aggressive, but clearer about his goals and assertive in pursuing them. As Luke put it, “sometimes it all feels like a dream”.

⁸ All names in case study boxes have been changed for anonymity.

3.4 Progression to volunteering or work

Progression to paid employment appears to have been relatively low during the period over which outcomes were recorded, although a high proportion expressed a desire to work. This is consistent with the findings of other research with single homeless people, which found that 97 per cent want to work in the future.⁹

Some workers and managers expressed a desire for better links with potential employers, so that greater outcomes might be achieved in respect of paid employment.

For some learners, employment was a realistic short term goal. A small proportion were in the process of setting up small businesses at the time of this evaluation, or were hoping to do so, and were signposted to appropriate support agencies by SmartSkills workers.

But it was clear from the research interviews with learners that many faced multiple barriers to future employment. Learners' support need might include, for instance: a continuing struggle to overcome substance misuse; depression; a need for anger management skills; poor literacy; and a need to continue to build confidence and self-esteem. Those with such multiple needs were more likely to view volunteering as a realistic first step towards eventual employment.

However, it was clear that many learners were gaining skills which would improve their employability. As well as functional skills such as the ability to use information technology and basic numeracy and literacy skills, this included soft skills, such as improved confidence and self-esteem, the ability to work in teams, set goals and organise own workload to achieve them, communicate well with and get along with others. The importance of these skills can often be under-rated by learning providers, however analysis of data from the National Child Development Survey has shown that social skills have a significant impact on labour market outcomes alongside functional skills.¹⁰

Not surprisingly, levels of volunteering were highest at those sites which directly offered volunteering opportunities. Two sites offered volunteering opportunities in their offices as well as in garden projects, and two others had secured funding to create volunteering opportunities for their clients as a means to improve health outcomes.

Whilst volunteering can be a valuable opportunity to develop skills which improve employability, those learners interviewed who were volunteering were more likely to quote a desire to 'give something back' as their primary motivation. For some, volunteering seemed to offer an important lifeline to the wider community, giving them a reason to get out of their home and interact with others.

"I liked being a volunteer. I used to teach computer skills. It made me feel good, giving skills to other people."

⁹ P. Singh (2005), *No home, no job: moving on from transitional spaces*. OSW: London.

¹⁰ P. Carneiro, et. al. (2006), *Which Skills Matter?* LSE: London.

“I want to give back. People have been good to me and I want to give back now.”

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. Previous research has found that three quarters of homeless people think that opportunities for volunteering or part time work would make a difference to their employment prospects.¹¹

3.5 Improved confidence and self-esteem

Many of the learners interviewed either directly reported an increase in their confidence and self-esteem since becoming involved in SmartSkills, or described the contrast in their situation now and prior to engagement in a way which demonstrated this.

“I’m more confident in talking and communicating now.”

“It has been fantastic... the change in me. My confidence has grown loads.”

“Before I didn’t trust anyone and didn’t want anyone to see me. I was using drugs and in a right state. I had no confidence and would be stuck indoors for days.”

The increased confidence resulted from a combination of factors, including the sense of academic achievement. However, the primary factor for many learners appears to have been the intense one-to-one support offered by SmartSkills workers. All sites offered this type of personalised support even when – as was the case in some of the sites – they also offered group learning alongside this. At some sites the staff to learner ratio was only 1:5, which was in sharp contrast to the SmartMove services which often had staff to client ratios of 1:30 or more. Receipt of intense, one-to-one, client-led support seems to have been a life affirming experience for some learners.

“Working one-to-one makes you feel special.”

“When someone gives you good advice and talks to you good, you are rich.”

“[SmartSkills worker] is great. I don’t know what I’d have done without her. She’s given me back my confidence and self-respect.”

¹¹ P. Singh (2005), *No home, no job: moving on from transitional spaces*. OSW: London

3.6 Independent living

Some learners reported benefits from engagement in SmartSkills that have a direct relationship on their ability to live successfully in independent housing. These included budgeting skills, meal preparation and cooking, and negotiation with other agencies to gain access to services.

“I’ve just negotiated a gym membership under the GP referral scheme and wouldn’t have had the confidence to do that before.”

“SmartSkills has helped me prepare for independence. It has taught me how to budget, to plan ahead for the week, and understand about healthy living.”

Given the relevance of some of the learning modules to independent living (such as ‘Handling my own money’ and ‘Confidence and Independence’), such benefits are hardly surprising. However, it is worth noting that these seemed to be more likely to be quoted by the pilot sites which give greater emphasis between SmartSkills and tenancy management skills.

Healthy living sessions were run at most of the sites and were popular with learners. They were usually undertaken as group sessions and involved learners planning and cooking together or individually. They were seen to be fun, and a way to meet other people at the same time as learning valuable skills that could be put into practice when learners had their own flat.

3.7 Direction, purpose, goals

A high proportion of learners interviewed mentioned the new structure, goals and purpose in their lives as a result of becoming engaged in structured learning. Some learners said that this was the first time in their lives when they had specific goals and ambitions. As positive changes began to happen in their lives, learners began to feel that other changes might also be possible. For some, the engagement in SmartSkills had clearly been a springboard to bigger changes in their lives.

3.8 Reductions in substance misuse

Those learners who reported the most life changing impacts from engagement in SmartSkills were often former substance misusers. For this group, learning was a means of keeping busy and away from former associates and habits. It seemed to play a crucial role in their efforts to reduce or end problematic use of drugs or drink.

“It keeps me occupied and helps me stay off the drink.”

“The meditation has helped me handle stress without going to get out of my head.”

Whereas all learners interviewed gained at least one benefit from engagement, this group was striking due to the multiple benefits that they experienced. In particular, they valued the one-to-one support, the structure and routine provided by the learning framework (as an alternative to their drink/drug taking routine), and the chance to develop or regain confidence and self-esteem.

Case Study – Mandy

When Mandy first heard about SmartSkills she didn't think it was for her. She was homeless and on crack and heroin. She took drugs as soon as she got up in a morning. She didn't think she would be reliable enough to stick with it; she didn't think she was ready to change. But something made her pick up the phone.

The Smartskills worker asked her what she was interested in and they began working on those areas. She feels that the SmartSkills worker was instrumental in keeping her on track, and that it would have been difficult to give up after she had been so committed and caring towards her.

“She is amazing. She really makes you feel it is all about you.”

Now Mandy has moved into a new flat, enrolled on a college course, and has started a small hairdressing business. She says she “really loves learning”.

In the past she had no ambition or confidence, and stayed indoors most of the time. She didn't think she deserved to achieve good things in her life. Now she knows she deserves good things in life.

“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.”

3.9 Reductions in crime

Several learners mentioned reductions in crime or anti-social behaviour since engagement in SmartSkills. The inference in at least three cases was that the gains in self-esteem made by the learner resulted in them giving greater respect to others.

“Now I feel better. I know how to respect people. Before I used to sit and drink and shout at people in the street. Now I am proud.”

These increases in self-esteem seemed to be linked with reductions in anger and despair, which in turn reduced the likelihood of anti-social or violent incidents.

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 all kinds 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”.

3.10 Improved physical or mental health

Symptoms of depression and anxiety were reported by a high proportion of learners interviewed, and a small number also reported post traumatic stress disorder or problems with anger management. These results are not surprising since large numbers of single homeless people are reported to have symptoms of mental ill health.¹²

Where possible, SmartSkills workers referred those with mental health needs to counselling services, but these were often only available after a long wait or with volunteer/trainee counsellors. At four of the sites, the SmartSkills workers had received specialist training in therapeutic approaches, and learners at most of these appeared to be reaping significant benefits from this more specialist expertise.

“At times, I was so depressed as I was still using [drugs]. I found it useful to talk to [the SmartSkills worker] about my problems. I became more self-aware and am now able to recognise patterns in my behaviour. I can’t tell you how much benefit I got out of being able to do that.”

“I used to sit at home all day playing video games. It was getting me down.”

“It gives me focus and a reason to get out of the house. Before, I was depressed. I had no reason to get up and out of bed.”

Physical health needs were also relatively common. No direct benefits were reported for pre-existing medical conditions. However the emphasis on healthy living in both of the learning frameworks used, together with the more positive outlook achieved by many learners, could deliver health benefits in the longer term.

“I’ve got more awareness now of what a healthy diet is and really try to stick to that.”

¹² S. Rees (2009), *Mental Ill Health in the Adult Single Homeless Population – A review of the literature*. Crisis: London.

3.11 Improved social networks

Every site organised group activities to some extent and these gave learners the opportunity to meet other people if they wished. These were popular with some, but not all, learners.

Research has highlighted the social isolation and exclusion common in many homeless people's lives.¹³ It revealed that less than a third of people who are homeless spend time with non-homeless people, and almost one in four spend the day alone. A third of men reported that their only daily contact was with service providers, and more than half said they had no 'family ties'.

This research also confirmed that picture for the learners interviewed, some of whom clearly depended upon the SmartSkills services and others for their human contact. Continuing this social contact seemed to be a motivation for some learners to continue to engage with the service after achieving their qualification.

"The only thing is the loneliness. All the people I knew were also using drugs and I had to turn my back on them. That is difficult. It is difficult to make new friends."

"I have no friends. These are my friends – the gym, college, being here."

Social isolation was particularly marked for some ex-drug users who had chosen to sever ties with all former drug taking associates. However, at the point of initial engagement not all people with these circumstances had the confidence to engage in groups. Those who were estranged from family were also more likely to want to take part in group activities.

"I've met some nice people. It's hard to socialise sometimes."

"It has made me more at ease with other people."

¹³ A. Jones and N. Pleace (2005), *Daytime Homelessness*. Crisis: London.

Case Study – Jack

Jack is in his late twenties. He had done well academically and was also very artistic. He was the first member of his family to get a place at university and his family's expectations of him were very high. He took a marketing and business degree, rather than the art degree he would have preferred, and following university secured a highly paid job, and bought his own house. However, he was already suffering from depression and anxiety and had difficulties in interacting with other people.

Jack ended up heavily into drugs and with huge debts. Eventually he became bankrupt, his home was repossessed, and he became homeless. With the help of a drug support project and SmartSkills he has now been off drugs for some time, is living in stable rented accommodation and has created new structure and stability in his life. He is still struggling with depression, but things are starting to get better:

"I was a really bad junkie – when you first get clean everything seems really dark so you just want to use again. It's such a slump of depression – I was depressed using drugs and even more depressed coming off them, but [SmartSkills worker] has helped me get through it. The feelings of general worthlessness are improving."

He avoids seeing any of his old friends as they are all still using drugs heavily and at first was very lonely and isolated. With the help of the SmartSkills worker he has turned back to his interest in art and music, is getting tuition, and has made new friends.

"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."

Jack is starting to see how he might be able to use the marketing and business skills and knowledge he acquired at university to help turn his music into a new career. He hopes to work again in the future, and is clearer that doing work that he feels is meaningful and worthwhile to him is what he wants rather than the high salaries he earned before in a job he hated.

"I can see the point of making an effort now. Before I didn't have any desire to make anything work for myself, but things are brightening, and I can see a reason for going forward."

3.12 Rebuilding family ties

Research into the causes of homelessness consistently shows that relationship breakdown, with family and partners and other disruptions to family life such as bereavement or children being removed into local authority care are all key contributing factors to homelessness.¹⁴

For women in particular, homelessness is often linked to escaping violent or abusive relationships. Central government policy is now increasingly focused on family breakdown/dysfunction as a casual factor linked to homelessness.¹⁵ This has resulted in targeted interventions such as Family Intervention Projects which are multi-agency approaches aimed at breaking inter-generational homelessness linked to inter-generational cycles of poverty and multiple disadvantage.¹⁶

At several of the pilot sites there appeared to be real benefits emerging in relation to rebuilding family ties for many of the learners. A recent study showed that although people who are homeless value highly the support of family, 61 per cent of women and 46 per cent of men are not in contact with their families.¹⁷ During the fieldwork interviews, many of the learners talked about the loss of contact with their families as a contributing cause or consequence of their homelessness and often described painful feelings of guilt, failure and shame linked to those losses of contact. Learners described the sense of achievement developed during the programme as key to rebuilding enough self esteem and confidence to initiate contacts with family members, or improving difficult relationships with families.

“My family didn’t really want anything to do with me when I became homeless because of my drug use. They let me sleep on the sofa, but they were disgusted with me. Now they are a lot happier that I am off drugs, have a place of my own, and can show them what I have done for myself.”

The benefit of rebuilding family ties is possibly the most significant and highly valued impact of SmartSkills for some of the learners interviewed, and for others helped to contribute to improved motivation, confidence and self esteem.

In some instances it appeared that there may be a further level of benefit in the impact on some of the factors linked with inter-generational homelessness. At one pilot site, four of the six learners interviewed were women, all of whom had a background of experiencing violence or abuse – as a child, in an adult relationship, or both. The worker confirmed that this is typical of the profile of women using SmartSkills at that site overall, whose needs tend to be multiple and include mental illness and/or substance misuse.

¹⁴ J. Smith, et al (2008), *Valuable Lives: Capabilities and resilience amongst homeless people*. Crisis: London.
See also: A. Jones, et al, (2002), *Firm Foundations: an Evaluation of the Shelter Homeless to Home Service*. CHP, University of York: York; G Randall and S. Brown (2001), *Trouble at Home: Family conflict, young people and homelessness*. Crisis: London; I. Breugal and J. Smith (1999), *Taking Risks*. Safe in the City: London.

¹⁵ CLG and DCSF (2008), *Joint working between Housing and Children’s Services: Preventing homelessness and tackling its effects on children and young people*. London.

¹⁶ J. Gallagher and J. Luby (2008), *Family Value: the role of family and parenting in homelessness*. Andrews Charitable Trust.

¹⁷ J. Smith, et al (2008), *Valuable Lives*. Crisis: London.

These four women were all mothers of children under the age of 18. However, none of them had custody of their children, all of whom were in the care of a local authority or in one instance in the care of the father. Recent research shows that homeless women most commonly describe coping with the loss of their children as one of the hardest things they struggle with.¹⁸ The positive impacts on improved self esteem, motivation and confidence were particularly important to these women as they all described their achievements within SmartSkills as having a direct effect on the way they were able to cope with the loss of their children, and build some hope for the future.

Case Study – Julia

Julia had an extremely traumatic history of childhood abuse and subsequently ended up in an abusive relationship as a result of which her children were taken into care. In mid life now, she described how she spent nearly two decades using drugs heavily with no sense of self-worth or purpose in her life, exploited and abused by local drug dealers. Her children, siblings and wider family refused to have any contact with her, and she described a desolate sense of isolation through these long years.

“When I was on drugs, I locked myself away, I hid myself away – you feel people are looking at you. I was afraid to go out in case of people seeing me.”

Julia eventually became homeless through eviction and was re-housed through a specialist housing project for recovering drug users, although she was still finding it difficult to stay off drugs. Then she met the SmartSkills worker, who asked her a question which changed everything:

“Before this I’d had no free life you see. Then she asked me what I wanted from life.”

Julia has now been drug free for two years, has completed her Profile of Achievement, goes to church and has a part time job in the café in the heart of the community where she was previously afraid to show her face. Most importantly,

“I got back with my family after all those years. Now I see my oldest child quite regular. My sisters and brother, my auntie and uncle, my nieces and nephews and cousins. And I’ve got a grandchild! My grandchild comes once a week to stay with me now and I’m trusted to look after him. I’ve only seen my middle child three times in the last 13 years when they were taken into care and I haven’t seen my youngest at all since then, but I hope they’ll come back to me too when they realise I’ve cleaned up. I feel brilliant. I didn’t expect to have my family back and I didn’t expect it to be like it is. Or to have access to my grandchild! She’s [SmartSkills worker] helped me get everything I wanted from life.”

¹⁸ Ibid.

As Julia's case shows, losing children to the local authority care system can be an experience which robs a woman of all hope for the future. For the women learners in these circumstances it can be inferred that the benefits of SmartSkills may contribute positively to breaking the intergenerational cycle of disadvantage linked to homelessness. If these women are able to achieve greater emotional and financial stability, they have a much greater chance to make a positive contribution to the care and wellbeing of their children, whether or not they are able to regain custody. In addition, it raises their potential for a more realistic chance of a fresh start should she have more children.

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.”

Research on domestic abuse indicates that the children of abused women are up to six times more likely to be at risk of becoming victims of abuse themselves.¹⁹ In a case like Susie's, if she can use her experiences of SmartSkills and support from Women's Aid to end her vulnerability to being caught up in violent and abusive relationships, she may be able to pass on her learning to her children, both in the way she manages her future relationships and in the way she relates to her children's fathers in the future,

¹⁹ M. Cohen, et. Al. (2003), 'Intergenerational Transmission of Partner Violence: A 20 year Prospective Study', *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 71:4, 741-53; Bensley, L. (2003) 'Childhood Family Violence History and Women's Risk for Intimate Partner Violence and Poor Health', *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*, 25:1, 38-44; and Tribal (2008), unpublished research for an inner London Council. London.

which would introduce a new protective factor into her children's lives.

3.13 Cost effectiveness

Wider research has suggested that engagement in learning and skills development can deliver many benefits for vulnerable learners, in addition to the achievement of qualifications and increased access to work.²⁰ This evaluation suggests that these additional benefits are most likely to arise for more vulnerable learners, and particularly those who have a history of substance misuse, mental ill health or offending.

The cost of SmartSkills is around £1,500 per learner.²¹ If we compare this to some of the outcomes that may be achieved with learners (which reflect the outcomes reported during our interviews with learners), we can see that this may be a cost-effective investment for the public purse overall, even if only a proportion of learners achieve one or more of these outcomes.

Figure 2 below provides some indicative costs of the types of outcomes which could be avoided through a package of support which includes SmartSkills.

Figure 2 – Indicative Costs of Outcomes Avoided

Comparative Costs	Cost
Costs saved over a year from returning child from fostercare to mother	£32,916 ²²
Cost of a year in prison	£23,585 ²³
Incident of repeat homelessness for vulnerable single adult	£17,600 ²⁴
Residential Drug Treatment	£5,299 ²⁵
Supervision by National Offender Management Service	£2,516 ²⁶
Course of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy	£2,010 ²⁷
Costs of an anti-social behaviour incident	£204 ²⁸

²⁰ J. Luby and J. Welsh (2006), *Missed Opportunities*. Crisis: London.

²¹ Based on £30,000 funding per worker and an assumed annual caseload of 20 learners. This does not include accrediting body costs.

²² Based on estimated weekly costs of effective fostercare taken from R. Tapsfield and F. Collier (2005), *The cost of foster care*. British Association for Adoption & Fostering: London.

²³ Average cost estimated in Matrix (2007), *The economic case for and against prison: technical appendix*. Matrix Knowledge Group: London.

²⁴ Based on costs of landlord of failed tenancy of £2,000 (source: <http://acextranet.audit-commission.gov.uk/bvpi/Guidance/piDetail.asp?pild=PI378>) and costs of support during a two year stay in supported accommodation of £15,600 (source: Luby J (2008) *Private Access; Public Gain Crisis*)

²⁵ Average cost per person per year estimated in Matrix (2007), *The economic case for and against prison*. Matrix Knowledge Group: London.

²⁶ Hansard, 16 Dec 2008, Column 563W – based on average across all supervised offenders in a given year

²⁷ Based on published costs at www.centreforcbtcounselling.co.uk for 16 sessions

²⁸ Economics and Resource Analysis Unit (undated), *Costing the response to Anti-social behaviour – A Note*. Home Office.

4. Evaluation of the delivery model

4.1 Methods of learning

One-to-one learning support was provided at all the pilot sites. The key difference between sites was the nature and extent of group activities. At one site group activities consisted of weekly yoga sessions and the occasional day out. In most cases learners could opt in or out of group activities, but at two sites group learning sessions were a regular weekly event, and in one they were compulsory. At some sites group activities were described which were primarily social events, but clearly had a direct link with personal learning and achievement for some learners.

Crisis required the pilot sites to provide learning support which was person centred, and one-to-one support offers maximum opportunity to achieve this. Both the Learn Power and Profile of Achievement awards offer a flexible choice of modules for study, at different levels from Entry Level 3 through to Level 1. Individualised support enables the SmartSkills worker to tailor the learning to the specific interests and capabilities of the individual learner. This is particularly important for learners with poor self-esteem and whose motivation to engage in learning might otherwise be low.

“The one-to-one is important. I didn’t want to feel stupid in front of others. On drugs you have no self-esteem.”

“I would have felt thick in a group.”

The ability to learn on a one-to-one basis, without a need for group learning appeared to be particularly important for learners who were or had been substance misusers. This group often reported anxiety about group learning (prior to starting SmartSkills), and having particularly benefited from being the focus of intense one-to-one support. The intensity of support in some cases is discussed further in 5.2 below.

Where group activities or learning took place, this was clearly valued by some learners due to the potential for socialising and learning from others this created. These sessions appeared to be most popular with those who are estranged from family or had few friends. Nevertheless, there were some in this position for whom group learning was a step too far initially. At one site at which group learning was a compulsory part of the curriculum, some potential learners had not engaged for that reason. For other learners, the ability to meet and interact with others during the course of the study was a clear motivating factor.

Group learning sessions depend upon some degree of uniformity in coverage across learners in order to be successful. At one site, the learning curriculum is prescribed at outset so that all learners cover the same six modules, which are seen to have specific relevance to independent living. The learning is delivered in groups which include learners of mixed ages and gender. Whilst there have been some tensions between group members, the tutor believes that this has created valuable learning experiences for how to get along with others and work as part of a team.

With only one SmartSkills worker in an organisation working with a caseload whose interests, educational backgrounds, and needs differ widely, it is important that the learning framework is able to be moulded around these differences if it is to have wide appeal. However, whilst this flexibility is important, the feedback from learners also illustrated the importance of adopting a structured approach to learning.

At one site there had been frequent changes of staff during the two to three years that SmartSkills had been operational, and the service had adapted from being fairly loose learning support to a closely prescribed programme of learning. One learner, who had been part of the programme during these changes, was much happier with the more structured approach now in place as he could see more clearly that progress was being made towards his learning goals. A need for ‘structure’ and clear goals was also mentioned by several learners across the pilot sites as a reason for engaging in the first place. There are potential tensions in offering both flexibility and structure at the same time however, which are reflected in the comment from a learner below.

“I wanted structure - to be doing something regularly. It’s about getting someone to feel good about something. It has to be flexible.”

Whilst all of the pilot sites offered support to progress beyond the support and learning offered by SmartSkills, this element of the service was not prescribed in the same way as the initial learning support. And the extent to which links were in place with external agencies able to support progression goals differed across sites.

Figure 3 – Learning Support Sessions

One-to-one support sessions	typically took place once a week and lasted one to two hours. However, this varied across individual learners.
Group sessions	varied in length and frequency across sites. At one they took place once a week for a full day. At another they took place three times a week for a half day. Other sites used group sessions on an ad hoc basis.
Length of engagement	ranged from three months to nine months depending on the capabilities and circumstances of the individual learner.

4.2 Strengths based approaches to learning

The SmartSkills learning framework is a strengths-based model. Strengths based approaches build on the existing strengths of the individual to grow and develop, rather than more traditional ‘deficit’ approaches which tend to focus on trying to ‘fix’ weaknesses, and can focus heavily on past experiences alone rather than learning from the past to achieve future change.

A Solutions Focused Development approach was a specific method applied in the Welsh pilot sites and also applied across the board within that host organisation’s services for homeless people. This approach is derived from Solution Focused Brief Therapy, and linked to the principles of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. All staff, including the SmartSkills workers, had received training in the approach by a qualified trainer. Staff in the Welsh pilots felt that the skills they had acquired through this training had enhanced their ability to deliver the SmartSkills programme because both approaches were strengths based. The principle that ‘everyone is an expert in something’ is generally applicable in both approaches. However, the specific skills and practices learned in the Solutions Focused training had helped the Welsh staff to implement the SmartSkills learning framework in a very systematic way, which was fully integrated with the way that other key staff trained in the same approach (for instance, tenancy support workers) also related to the same individual.

Some learners commented specifically on this:

“They’re all the same here – my friendship with [SmartSkills worker] is really important to me, and it’s her I feel close to, but they all treat you in the same way and I know if she wasn’t here it would be ok to go and ask one of the others and they would treat you just as well.”

“The organisation as a whole is like this, it not just [SmartSkills worker]. They’re all willing to talk and help and find solutions.”

A number of SmartSkills workers had also undertaken formal counselling training. Three of them talked explicitly about the benefits that counselling skills and experience gave them, because of the principles of unconditional acceptance and empathy which underpin most counselling approaches. Although counselling is not necessarily a strengths-based approach, the workers with counselling training described their skills in this area as a good fit with the strengths based approach of the learning model.

It is worth noting that none of the SmartSkills pilots had specialist supervision for the work being undertaken with learners in a more counselling based or Solutions Focused Development mode. One worker did have access to clinical supervision, but this was a benefit available to her from her volunteer work for another organisation, and bore no relation to this programme.

4.3 Staffing

All the SmartSkills workers had backgrounds which typically included a mixture of past experience of working with vulnerable people and/or work in learning and skills development. One worker described being homeless in the past which had had an impact on that individual's approach to the work.

During the learner interviews we asked about the key attributes of a good SmartSkills worker. People stressed the need for the right kind of personality – empathy, friendliness and approachability, reliability and consistency, acceptance, creativity, strong listening skills, patience, tolerance and the ability to withhold judgement.

“She is an excellent person...like a friend...like a psychiatrist. She has changed my life. Everyone else says the same; she has changed their lives in a positive way.”

“She would never turn me away, not once.”

“[SmartSkills worker] was instrumental in helping me to change. She gives me ideas and bolsters me. I can't tell you enough how amazing she is.”

Energy and dynamism were also important:

“It's not just about the support – although that is crucial. It's also about being the right kind of person who can make things happen, about being able to knock on doors, pick up phones, be pro-active, seize opportunities.”

The intensity and intimacy of such a close working relationship with some of the most vulnerable learners within the programme meant that it was an ongoing challenge for some of the SmartSkills workers to manage professional boundaries. Learners who were particularly socially excluded, had been emotionally damaged in abusive relationships, or were struggling to break away from old friendships and destructive social networks, seemed prone to become dependent on the relationship with the worker. Managing the tension between fulfilling a supportive role characterised by the attributes described above whilst also enabling and empowering the learner to move towards greater independence was sometimes difficult. The positive experience of the learner's relationship with the worker typified in the quotation below, places significant burdens on the worker:

“She [SmartSkills worker] kept me going. I don't know what I would have done without her – it seems like I've known her a lot longer than three years. She's always at the other end of the phone. I can relax; I know I can sleep at night. If I have troubles I know there is someone I can go to. If something is upsetting me I know she's there for me.”

A worker's knowledge that he or she is possibly the most significant person in the learner's life, or at least the only person the learner can rely upon to be there, is a heavy responsibility to bear. This willingness to play a wider support role for the learner did differ across individual staff, however. One of the SmartSkills workers was keen to keep her role focused on learning support needs only, and set boundaries around the personal matters she was willing to discuss beyond this. This worker had

previously worked with vulnerable women in an employment support service and had found aspects of that work to be an emotionally draining experience, and one which she did not wish to repeat.

When learners described what was good about SmartSkills and what they had gained from it, they often expressed this in relation to the skills and attributes of the worker, rather than in relation to the content of the learning framework – as shown by the learner comments above. This highlights the dependence upon the calibre of individual workers, and the vulnerability of outcomes to change when staff leave.

In this context the role of the SmartSkills workers in some of the pilots appeared to be isolated and lacking in appropriate support and supervision. Linking SmartSkills to a housing service generates substantial benefits as discussed above. But it also means that line managers may not always be best placed to provide SmartSkills staff with the type of supervision which helps them deal with the emotional needs of learners or help them develop competence in managing this aspect of their work. This appeared to be more of an issue where the SmartSkills worker was less integrated with the wider work of the host organisation. However, in the two Welsh projects where the strengths based learning approach of SmartSkills had been systemically embedded within the wider organisation, one of the workers described the difference this made:

“In a previous job when I was doing my counselling course it was very valuable to have clinical supervision, as I had a manager where I would have struggled to raise some of the issues I was dealing with. Here it’s very different – there’s a lot of mutual and open caseload support which is the way we all work.”

Figure 4 below summarises some of the common aspects of the ways workers described their approaches to undertaking one-to-one work with learners.²⁹

²⁹ Further information can be found in the Crisis SmartSkills manual at <http://www.crisis.org.uk/page.builder/SmartSkills.html>

Figure 4 – Ways of Working

- A SmartSkills worker uses whatever has sparked the individual learner's initial interest as the foundation for working together. This may range from developing the practical skills involved in moving into a new home, or following a personal interest, or may involve helping the learner begin to identify and articulate previously unexpressed wishes and desires.
- This requires a skilled, sensitively managed initial engagement with the learner: *"Sometimes a learner is clear on what they want. With others I spend time at the beginning, maybe a number of sessions, getting them to tell me about themselves and what is important to them, which helps them think about why they want to do this as well as building trust."*
- Through this initial exploratory process the worker is able to pick up on what skills, abilities and aptitudes the learner already has – helping her (or him) to reflect on her own experience and capabilities and begin to build a stronger sense of self belief.
- Once a learner has clarified for herself (or himself) what she wants to develop, the worker help her design a unique learning programme through which core skills such as numeracy and literacy can be developed, as well as other desired skills, such as computer skills or social skills.
- Some learners like more formal methods such as using worksheets, others prefer more practical and applied ways of learning – budgeting, weighing and measuring in cookery, looking up and using bus and train timetables to plan a real journey, using the internet to find a belly dancing class. The worker uses whatever motivates and captures the imagination of the individual as the raw material for learning.
- The worker tailors the programme to the individual's needs, letting her (or him) set a pace with which she is comfortable, helping her adjust the pace if her circumstances change – a new part time job might mean changing the day or timing of one-to-one work, increasing confidence might mean she wants to speed up and do more, a forthcoming court case might mean she feels stressed and needs to slow the pace for a while. There is room for flexibility rather than failure.
- Meeting once, twice, sometimes three times a week, over a period of perhaps two or three months, and for some people over six months or more, the worker supports the learner to direct her own learning, reflect on it and move forward. Accompanying the learner into difficult situations – a visit to the library, going to a class for the first time, making an appeal against a benefit decision – the worker provides a supportive presence until it is no longer needed.
- Negotiating changes and achieving cumulative small successes teaches the learner that she or he can use the same skills to tackle the big things in his life, and cope.
"With Peter's gardening project, watching things he's planted grow has helped things grow inside him."

4.4 The value of accredited learning

The learning frameworks used in SmartSkills (Learn Power and Profile of Achievement), are City and Guilds Qualifications. They enable learners to achieve a nationally accredited qualification at Entry Level or Level One. Entry level qualifications are designed to be suitable for those with no existing qualifications, as an introduction or re-introduction to formal learning, and can be studied at a flexible pace. Level One qualifications are equivalent to a GCSE grades D to G.

The fact that the learning undertaken as part of SmartSkills led to an accredited qualification was an important motivating factor for many learners. Around half of the learners interviewed during this evaluation described this as an important feature for them. Both qualifications build evidence of learning potential and achievement through compilation of a portfolio which contains evidence and examples of learning. Both the portfolio and award certificates achieved upon completion of SmartSkills were an important source of pride for many learners.

“I got given my certificate by the Mayor. He was really interested and we got on. It was a great day. It made me feel special and interesting.”

The Learn Power Award is the qualification used at most of the pilot sites. This qualification was developed by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) specifically for use with homeless people and includes a number of predefined modules of learning which the learner is able to choose from. It was developed and piloted with organisations working with homeless people, and is therefore focused on areas of common need for them.

The Profile of Achievement is used at the Welsh pilot sites, and is a method of recording and recognising learning which can be adapted to almost any setting. Providers of this qualification can create their own modules for learning in agreement with the City and Guilds external evaluator.

Both qualifications are characterised by their flexibility and ability to be adapted to the specific learning needs of people who are returning to study after a long break, or whose learning needs extend to self-awareness and development. Some examples of their coverage are provided earlier in this report at section 2.3.

SmartSkills staff were universally positive about the two qualifications and their effectiveness as learning tools with single homeless people. Their flexibility and ability to be adapted to the interests and capabilities of a wide variety of learners were widely appreciated. Whilst some learners remarked on the coverage of the learning modules (for instance, several valued the opportunity to extend their ICT skills, and one valued the scope for self reflection that Learn Power provided), for many the content of their learning seemed be less important than the process of learning – whether this be one-to-one or group learning – and the support and positive feedback received during this process.

Of the seven pilot sites, only three (Barnet, Edinburgh and Teesside) were successful in finding colleges willing to work with them on delivering the qualifications, and one

college subsequently withdrew. The Wallich, which delivers SmartSkills in Bridgend and Swansea, became a City and Guilds Centre in its own right. But Canterbury, Calderdale and at a later stage, Barnet, relied on Crisis for accreditation (although Crisis has now lost funding for this). The unwillingness of colleges to work in partnership on these arrangements appears to be because of the small numbers of learners involved (often only 20 per year), and the high risk of attrition with homeless learners. These barriers reflect the funding arrangements from the LSC which are based on actual rather than anticipated levels of achievement.

Whilst the LSC provides funding to colleges³⁰ to deliver qualifications such as Learn Power or the Profile of Achievement, it is reported to be impossible to deliver the learning outcomes required with homeless people using this funding alone. Crisis estimated, for instance, that LSC funding makes up less than half the cost of delivering a Learn Power qualification.

In 2009/10, the priority for LSC funding will be in increasing the engagement of young people aged 16-18 in learning (£6.69 billion which represents a 71 per cent increase upon the previous year)³¹. This will be roughly double the budget for adult learners. Almost half of funding for adult learning will go to pre-level two qualifications (£1.5 billion out of a total of £3.3 billion). However, this will be increasingly targeted at learning with a clear link to employability.

From 2009 onwards, LSC funding will increasingly only be available for qualifications included on the new Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF). This new framework is meant to simplify the means of recognising the value of different qualifications by awarding learning 'credits' to units of study across a wide range of examining/accreditation bodies. In doing so it should give more recognition to small steps in learning and avoid the need to duplicate learning when switching to other qualifications. At present, neither Learn Power nor the Profile of Achievement qualifications are included on the QCF which, if this remains the case, will reduce the chances of funding becoming available to deliver them. There are, however, potential alternative qualifications which provide some overlap of content (although with less emphasis on non-work related self-development), including the new Employability and Personal Social Development Qualification, which is available to study at Entry Levels and Level One. Examples of the modules included in this qualification are shown below:

³⁰ In 2010 many of the functions of the Learning and Skills Council will transfer to the Skills Funding Agency (in relation to adult learning) and to local authorities and the Young People's Learning Agency (for learners aged 19 and under).

³¹ See DIUS and DCSF (2008), *Government Investment Strategy 2009-10, LSC Grant Letter and LSC Statement of Priorities: Investing in our future through learning and skills*. London.

Figure 5 – Modules for Employability and Personal Social Development

- Effective skills, qualities & attitudes for learning & work
- Introduction to ICT
- Career Planning and Making Applications
- Rights and Responsibilities in the Workplace
- Personal Skills
- Managing Personal Finances
- Supporting Others
- Planning for Progression

4.5 Learning and housing: greater than the sum of two parts?

Crisis' objectives for SmartSkills³² reflect its belief that learning is an integral part of rebuilding lives after homelessness and avoiding future homelessness. One of the primary aims of SmartSkills has been to develop a model of bringing housing and learning services together. The inference is, therefore, that in doing so there will be improved housing outcomes for service users.

SmartSkills providers were required to record engagement of learners in SmartSkills, the modules and awards achieved by learners, and their engagement in employment, volunteering or further education. However, the means of recording this information differed across organisations, which made comparisons across the pilot sites difficult. The reporting system recorded short term outcomes only, with no measurement of longer term outcomes after engagement in SmartSkills had ended. Arrangements were not in place to measure outcomes achieved (in relation to volunteering, education or employment) at similar SmartMove services for comparison purposes, or with other housing clients within the service not taking up SmartSkills, thereby making it difficult to identify the distinct value of SmartSkills compared to other service interventions.

Nevertheless, we can make some comparisons with wider research data in order to draw conclusions. For instance:

- Less than a fifth of homeless people engage in learning,³³ whereas between a third and a half of SmartSkills learners progress onto more formal learning; and
- Only 13 per cent of homeless people are engaged in volunteering,³⁴ compared to 25 to 40 per cent of SmartSkills learners.

These effects may be understated due to the short term nature of the outcomes

³² Which included: i) To build the life skills and self-esteem of SmartMove tenants in order to better enable them to sustain their tenancies and 'move-on' in their lives away from homelessness and the problems and issues associated and ii) To develop a replicable model that can be rolled out to the wider SmartMove network through building the capacity of existing service providers.

³³ Opinion leader (2006), *Homeless People and Learning and Skills: participation, barriers and progression*. Crisis: London.

³⁴ Ibid.

recording. Whilst only low numbers progressed to employment in the short term, learners who completed their award are likely to have improved their employability significantly and therefore their prospects of securing work in the medium to long term.

There was evidence from both learners and SmartMove workers that engagement in SmartSkills was having a positive impact on independent living skills and tenancy sustainment for some learners. This is consistent with findings from wider research which has established links between tenancy failure and some of the needs which are addressed through SmartSkills, such as social isolation, poor money management, anti-social behaviour, and substance misuse.³⁵

The emphasis given to the links between the learning on offer and tenancy sustainment differed from site to site. In Teesside engagement was 'sold' to learners as a means of ensuring successful tenancy sustainment, and in Calderdale the modules taught were chosen because of their assumed direct relevance to successful independent living. At other sites, for instance Barnet and the two Welsh sites, the emphasis was much more strongly on learning as a means of improving life skills and achieving wider personal development.

Many of the SmartSkills learners would be regarded as 'hard to reach' learners, who are much less likely to engage in formal learning without encouragement and the opportunity to take their first steps in learning in a trusted setting. This appeared to be particularly the case for those with more complex needs for whom drug or alcohol misuse was or had been an issue. For these people, being offered learning by an organisation that was also providing valuable support with housing through a key worker system may have had a significant impact on take-up. SmartMove workers and support staff from other partner agencies have played a key role in encouraging take up of SmartSkills. The extent to which they believe in and 'sell' engagement in SmartSkills seems to have had a direct impact on take up rates.

Providers of services to homeless people will often point to the need to cut down the physical distance needed to travel to access services to increase take up and continued engagement, at least in the early stages. The ability to offer both learning support and housing support on the same site is therefore also likely to have greatly increased engagement levels.

These features do not necessarily depend upon a combined learning and housing service offering from the same organisation. Arguably the benefits described above could have been achieved by arranging in-reach from an external learning provider under a partnership arrangement. Those SmartSkills sites working in partnership with external housing providers were in effect already implementing such an arrangement. This type of partnership model may lend itself more readily to addressing some of the operational and funding challenges that organisations will face in seeking to replicate SmartSkills. By enabling the learning service to work across a number of housing providers, there is greater possibility to create the critical mass of learners that may attract funding and partnerships with colleges. It may also provide the opportunity

³⁵ J. Luby and J. Welsh (2006), *Missed Opportunities*. Crisis: London.

to employ a number of SmartSkills workers, and provide them with adequate peer and managerial support. As with any partnership, however, there would be a need to invest in, promote and measure the success of the arrangement within each organisation, so that managers and frontline staff are committed to it and ensure it achieves its full potential.

4.6 Embedding an organisational focus upon work and learning

The introduction of SmartSkills raised a number of challenges at an organisational level for all of the pilot sites which they addressed with varying degrees of success: the problem of being an ‘add on’ service; worker turnover, cover, continuity and sustainability; line management and supervision; worker isolation and lack of peer support on a day to day basis; questions of risk management and clinical supervision when working in one-to-one settings with vulnerable adults; and linking and integrating the SmartSkills work with the referring source whether in-house or an external agency.

SmartSkills appears to have had the most significant impact in embedding an organisational focus upon meaningful work and learning in the Welsh pilots and in Teesside.

In the Welsh pilots, the introduction of the SmartSkills model has had a tremendous impact on the host organisation’s organisational aims and the way in which it delivers services. Its introduction seems to have been timely, as the organisation was already aware of the importance of introducing learning alongside housing support to homeless people. But before the outset of the programme, the organisation had no accredited learning.

“All the work we’ve done through SmartSkills – we’ve learned loads as an organisation. It’s changed the organisation completely. It gave us lots of new information, but more importantly showed us that we needed to do things differently.”

The SmartSkills pilot has therefore been a key element of a process of change for the host organisation which has sought to embed the principle of being a learning organisation across all its work. This has included:

- The achievement of in-house City & Guilds accreditation centre status, now rated as A or excellent, which includes a lead internal verifier. Internal verifiers now provide support for all staff working with learners on accredited learning, moderate and standardise the assessment of portfolios, and check evidence on a systematic and frequent basis.
- The introduction of The Way Forward, a tailor made, organisation-wide programme which provides accredited learning opportunities to all clients using the host organisation’s services.
- The creation of new staff infrastructure – A Head of Learning responsible for the

delivery and integration of both client and staff learning, plus a Client Learning and Development Manager - which is raising the profile and centrality of learning and helping to embed the learning organisation approach.

- A new understanding of the role a service like SmartSkills can play in filling a gap in services which help people with particular vulnerabilities or multiple needs to prepare to enter or return to employment.

During the fieldwork a number of the staff commented on the fact that:

“It is life changing work for the clients but has been organisationally life changing too.”

In Teesside, learning and meaningful occupation were already seen to be a part of core service aims. The host organisation has a self-help approach which is inherently strengths focused, and prides itself on empowering people who are homeless. However, its activities in this area of service delivery had grown organically and sometimes lacked clear structure and frameworks for measuring achievements. The host organisation welcomes the structure and disciplines that SmartSkills has brought to its work.

The other pilot host organisations generally appear to have found SmartSkills a positive addition to their service repertoire, but it has not had the same impact of changing the way the organisation works. The problems with securing a critical mass of learners, finding a willing accreditation body, issues of staff turnover and continuity and the problems of taking the work forward within new funding regimes with a harder outcome focus on employability appear to have affected the pilot's abilities to embed the work within their organisational structure despite the positive results.

5. Conclusions and lessons for policy makers, funders and providers

5.1 Outcomes considered against original aims

The primary aim of the SmartSkills programme was to develop a replicable model which would enable SmartMove schemes (and potentially other housing providers for single homeless people) to promote learning opportunities to their clients, using the existing relationship between the SmartMove project workers and their clients to build 'bridges' to more formal learning opportunities. The specific objectives were:

- To build the life skills and self-esteem of SmartMove tenants in order to better enable them to sustain their tenancies and 'move-on' in their lives away from homelessness and the problems and issues associated;
- To develop a replicable model that can be rolled out to the wider SmartMove network through building the capacity of existing service providers; and
- To investigate, and where possible access, alternative continuation funding.

The preceding sections of this report demonstrate that there has been significant progress made against the original aim and objectives. Although it is difficult to measure this in quantifiable terms because of the limitations of the monitoring and evaluation arrangements put in place at the inception of the pilot programme. Nevertheless, there is strong qualitative evidence, based on the reports from learners themselves, that participation in the programme has substantively enhanced both self esteem and life skills for those who took up the offer. The model appears to have acted as an effective bridge to further learning for many otherwise 'hard to reach' learners.

The findings clearly indicate that this is a service delivery option that 'works' and is replicable. In the future it will be important to gather evidence around long-term outcomes for learners, how the gains work for people over time, and the longer term impact on their housing stability.

All the pilots have identified potential alternative continuation funding sources, although in every case this seems to have required some adaptation and restructuring of the current model to fit with funding criteria. Pilots have either submitted or are working on funding applications and it is likely that there will be at least some level of access to continuation funding achieved.

There are a number of key learning points from this evaluation that will be of interest and value to a range of audiences, but in particular to policy makers, potential funders and service providers interested in taking up the model and developing it further. These points are discussed below.

5.2 Critical success factors

By comparing outcomes and learner feedback across the different SmartSkills sites, it has been possible to draw out a number of features which seem to have played a

key role in enabling success in recruiting and retaining learners, and in delivering wider benefits with learners, including those considered ‘hard to reach’. These have been summarised in Figure 6 below:

Figure 6 – Critical Success Factors

Staffing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruit learning support staff who are welcoming, non-judgemental, proactive, patient and caring; • Ensure that frontline staff involved in recruiting/referring learners (in particular those in partner organisations, e.g., SmartMove housing workers making the initial referral) believe in the intrinsic value of learning for people with a history of homelessness, and are able to motivate clients to take the first steps to learning; • Keep worker/learner ratios low to enable personalised support (1:5 is the norm in SmartSkills projects); • Provide learning support staff with casework supervision which recognises the intensity of their work with individuals.
Learning methods
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be proactive in following up initial learner interest; • Use a learning framework that can be adapted to the specific interests and learning needs of the individual; • Take time to build confidence and identify interests • Offer a combination of group based and one-to-one learning so as not to rule out those for whom group learning is a ‘step too far’ at outset; • Use a strengths based approach to learning support which helps the learner identify the skills they already have to build upon, and start to believe that change is possible; • Help clients to become aware of any unhelpful patterns of thinking that may act as a barrier to sustained outcomes; • Break the learning into bite sized realistic goals which will deliver regular achievement along the way to any final qualification; • Offer a balance of structure and flexibility so as to keep learners motivated to achieve set goals, at the same time as minimising drop out rates; • Look for opportunities to link learners into outside service and networks wherever possible so as to reduce social exclusion; • Offer progression support to take learning to the next level.
Partnerships
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create partnerships with colleges and employers to maximise further opportunities for learners.
Focus on results
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognise a wide range of outcomes that include ‘soft’ skills as well as functional skills; • Measure outcomes so that you can continue to secure funding to continue your work, including through ‘distance travelled methods’.

5.3 Using a strengths based approach

The evaluation findings suggest a need for further development of the approaches to learning and skills being offered by homelessness agencies. Whilst many now offer learning opportunities, the majority do so as a 'bolt on' to their core business. Under this model, responsibility for supporting individuals with learning and employment lies solely with specialist staff and teams, to whom clients can be referred by housing support staff.

Whilst staff involved in learning and skills development often employ a strengths based approach, this is usually in contrast to the deficit model typically used by housing support and hostel workers. A deficit based approach attempts to identify the 'problems' and 'needs' of the client and then encourage them to accept support to address them. Clients can feel stigmatised and labeled by this process.

A strengths based approach differs by focusing not on the problems that the learner has, but their strengths and what they are already achieving despite the often adverse circumstances of their lives. In doing so this helps to stop the client feeling paralysed by problems and unable to contemplate positive change. Strengths based approaches are increasingly being used in mental health services as an aid to recovery.

If we accept that a strengths based approach can play a large part in sustaining the motivation of learners in spite of their lack of self-belief, this implies that where colleagues responsible for initial recruitment of learners use a deficit based approach, this is a major weakness in the model. Where this is the case it is perhaps not surprising that recruitment of learners becomes a constant struggle.

Homelessness agencies wishing to make learning and skills development a core part of their service offering should consider implementing a strengths based approach across their workforce. One SmartSkills pilot had done just this, and another was using tools developed for use in cognitive behavioural therapy to enable learners to identify how negative thinking patterns could influence their emotions and behaviour in an unhelpful way. It could be that personal learning opportunities, combined with functional or interpersonal skills development, offer the greatest prospects for a sustainable end to social exclusion.

5.4 Impact and target client group

Only a sub-set of SmartMove clients wanted to take up the learning offer, and there is no fundamental problem with this – it is an intensive service and therefore it makes sense that it should be available to those who can gain most from it. The evidence seems to suggest that those people who gained most from the intervention were people with multiple needs and vulnerabilities. For example, people misusing substances, women with experience of domestic abuse, people with mental health problems, and people with offending backgrounds.

The evidence also seems to suggest that the pilots were meeting a key gap in services for these sub-groups of the homeless population. People with these backgrounds of compounded homelessness are much less likely to move straight into pre-

employment services and training, even when they have an expressed desire to return to work. The SmartSkills model offers an opportunity to help people in these groups become more 'job ready', whether that means a move into paid employment or other meaningful occupation. It would therefore be worthwhile to test whether the impacts for these groups might have long term sustainable impacts which would deliver significant public cost benefits.

5.5 Critical mass of learners

As discussed earlier in the report, the relatively low numbers of learners and potentially high drop out rate made these types of programmes unattractive to colleges (due to the output and regulatory targets they are subject to from Ofsted and LSC). By enabling the learning service to work across a number of housing providers, there would be a greater possibility to create the critical mass of learners needed to attract funding and partnerships with colleges. It could also provide the opportunity to employ a number of SmartSkills workers, and provide them with the peer and managerial support they need.

SmartSkills projects are already working with external referral agencies beyond SmartMove to a greater or lesser extent. This could be continued, working through delivery partnerships (discussed below) to create a sufficient critical mass or referral pool, and to ensure effective targeting of the sub groups of potential learners described above.

5.6 Demonstrating impact

One of the weaknesses of the SmartSkills pilot programme was that the monitoring and evaluation systems set up at inception were not sufficiently rigorous or systematised across the seven different pilot sites. Providers should seek to improve upon this so they can demonstrate their effectiveness and enhance their chances of continued funding. A more robust evidence base is likely to be required to achieve sustainable funding from the statutory sector.

Any further development of the model for demonstration purposes (for instance further piloting) should have at its heart a robust evaluation framework which could also deliver an outcome evaluation model as a key output. Ideally, this should include:

- Development of a comprehensive baseline dataset drawn from knowledge held by both the individual learner and all involved agencies, shared through agreed information sharing protocols. This would enable a rigorous evaluation of 'distance travelled' by each individual learner;
- Measurement of short, medium and long term hard and soft outcomes for learners in areas such as confidence and self-esteem, housing stability, volunteering, education, and employment;
- Collection of standardised outcome data (for instance covering tenancy sustainment, skills development, employment) across SmartSkills clients and comparable clients receiving tenancy sustainment support only, to enable the

unique contribution of SmartSkills to be measured

- Development of a financial evaluation framework linking costs to outcomes which will enable the inclusion of cost/benefit analysis within the evidence being built.

A central element of the baseline data would need to capture a whole picture of the individual's life at the point of their engagement with the service, and plotting the changes over time. This would require a careful adaptation of the existing ways of working so that the key elements of trust building were not undermined, and workers would need training and guidance on ways of obtaining and recording key data (for example, when people disclose more detailed information retrospectively as trust is consolidated). It would also depend heavily on good relationships within the delivery partnership in order to secure reliable information sharing protocols.

5.7 Delivery partnership approach

Whilst Crisis' original aim was to test the model's effectiveness within SmartMove services, this is not the only context within which it could work effectively. Several of the pilot organisations are already working with clients of other supported housing providers for instance, and often offer a range of other types of housing and support themselves. Drug support agencies were also important partners in some areas. The findings from this evaluation suggest that, with the right infrastructure in place, this model of learning support would also be effective in other settings, including hostels, day centres, alongside drug treatment services, supported housing, as well as general needs housing agencies.

By working in partnership across a number of organisations working with homeless people, the learning service is more likely to achieve the critical mass needed to achieve sustainable funding, and adequate organisational infrastructure. However any partnerships must be founded upon close working relationships and understanding between different organisations. The extent to which frontline workers charged with recruiting learners believe in and are able to 'sell' the model appears to have a significant impact on take up, for instance. They are therefore an important link in the partnership chain.

In addition, this evaluation suggests that bringing the learning service to where potential learners are already accessing services, at least in the initial stages of engagement, will be an important factor in enabling trust and confidence to develop.

5.8 Infrastructural support

The report notes the intensity of learning support provided under the model and contrasts this to the much larger caseloads, and therefore more superficial support, of housing support colleagues at most of the pilot sites. This raises a number of issues around professional boundaries and supervision which are not easily addressed where SmartSkills is delivered by a lone worker 'bolted on' to a predominantly housing focused service. Where SmartSkills is just one part of a wider learning or more intense support offering from an organisation, the necessary infrastructure may already be in place including, for instance, appropriate line management and peer

support. Where this is not, a partnership approach with other providers may be a route to achieving this.

We suggest that it would be important in any replication or further development of the model to create a more substantive organisational infrastructure to ensure that the factors such as maintaining staff continuity, managing impact, measurement and delivery partnership relationships, and providing more structured and systematic supervision (potentially including clinical supervision) were adequately addressed.

5.9 Learning frameworks and accreditation models

Accreditation has been shown to be highly valued by a significant proportion of learners, and so any further development of or replication of the model should seek to incorporate accredited learning where possible. Providers should explore the factors that would make a project of this kind attractive to potential accreditation partners, including, for example, the critical mass factors.

From 2009 LSC funding will increasingly only be available for qualifications included in the new Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF), and there is intended to be increased targeting towards learning with clear links to employability. At present neither Learn Power nor the Profile of Achievement are in the QCF, which reduces the likelihood of their future funding unless their status changes. Unless alternative funding is available to meet the full costs of the learning service, providers will need to select an alternative qualification from the QCF. In doing so, it will be important to select an alternative which has overlap of content, but equally retains as much of the flexibility as possible from the current learning frameworks.

Where possible a combination of group and one-to-one learning should be offered to provide the ability to engage those who are, as yet, not confident in group settings, while also offering the opportunity for peer support and learning, as well as social networking, achievable from group activities.

5.10 Funding arrangements

The evaluation indicated that the LSC funding was insufficient for the programme costs – Crisis estimated that LSC funding makes up less than half the costs of delivering a Learn Power qualification. It will therefore be important to put realistic funding packages in place which are sufficient to fund the elements above, including the costs of measuring impacts, convening and supporting the delivery partnership and the costs of effective supervision and management support.

Local Area Agreements (LAAs) offer the potential to bring together a number of different funding sources across housing, health, social care and employment/training. This type of joint funding arrangement would reflect the range of benefits deliverable from the model, and their relevance to a number of national and local strategic priorities. There are a number of key public policy strategies which may lead to interest in this model beyond homelessness, including for example the National Drug Strategy, and other strategies relating to domestic abuse, mental illness and offending.

Each of these policy agendas and the funders responsible for them, have different policy and strategy targets. The extent of delivery against these will affect the prospects of continued funding from each source and so it will be important to clarify and agree at the outset what the core shared performance outcome indicators will be so that can help to shape the design of ongoing impact measurement.

5.11 Concluding comments

The SmartSkills pilot programme has indeed demonstrated that through the introduction of a strengths based learning programme, the life skills, self esteem and life chances of learners can be enhanced in many ways.

It demonstrates that a replicable model has been created which is already valuable, but also has great potential to be further developed, using the results of this evaluation, to have greater power and efficacy in improving the life chances of homeless people. It is clear that holistic and individually tailored support can assist those with multiple barriers to work and learning to develop the skills necessary to achieve fulfilling and productive lives within the mainstream of society.

The powerful feedback from learners in particular has demonstrated how, with the right support, engagement in learning can be a bridge to a much brighter future for even the most vulnerable of homeless people and deliver against national policy objectives to prevent and end homelessness and repeat homelessness.³⁶

³⁶ Recent Government sponsored research also suggests particular benefits from housing and employment services working together to tackle the high levels of worklessness amongst households needing support with housing. See D. R. Fletcher, et al (2008), *Social housing and worklessness: Key policy messages*. DWP Research Report no. 482. The Stationery Office: London.

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Appendix 1 – Description of the Pilot Sites

Teesside

Teesside Homeless Action Group (THAG) started life in 1997 as a small self-help group made up of homeless and ex-homeless people. Since then it has succeeded in attracting funding from a variety of non-statutory sources, and the input of homeless and non-homeless volunteers. It has a strong ethos of self-help and commitment to support homeless people to find their own solutions to homelessness. It works with homeless people of all ages and with a wide range of needs, including rough sleepers.

THAG has always included an emphasis on work and learning in its work, as reflected in its community gardening and volunteering projects. As an existing SmartMove scheme, THAG was eligible for SmartSkills funding and was successful in gaining this in December 2004. It has since gained funding for an additional SmartSkills worker to enable greater focus on progression opportunities, together with funding to create increased opportunities for volunteering linked to healthy living and well-being.

The qualifications framework used in Teesside is the Learn Power award, with Stockton Riverside College playing the role of the accrediting body. THAG is one of three housing organisations that the college works with to deliver Learn Power. The learning support is largely delivered on a one-to-one basis, although groups of learners get together for trips out and for cooking sessions linked to the healthy living module. A number of learners were also given support with job search.

Around 40 learners per year have engaged with SmartSkills (approximately 20 per worker). This represents around 40 per cent of SmartMove clients. Performance data suggests the following outcomes:

- 40 per cent of learners progress onto more formal adult learning;
- 25 per cent progress to employment; and
- 25 per cent begin volunteering.

Both SmartSkills workers had a background in providing employment or educational support to vulnerable people prior to take up of their current role.

Wales: Swansea and Bridgend

SmartMove has been running in Swansea since 2000 but was managed by other organisations before its transfer to The Wallich in 2004. Although SmartMove funding from Crisis had already ended by that stage, The Wallich was able to secure statutory funding for its continuation and also extend the service to Bridgend.

The Wallich is a well established homelessness charity which began in 1978 with a hostel in Cardiff and now offers a broad spectrum of services to homeless people including traditional outreach, specialist accommodation, training, education, mediation, tenancy support and homeless prevention. The Wallich employs around 200 staff and has over 30 projects across 15 of Wales' 22 local authorities. Its specialist accommodation in Swansea includes the award winning Shoreline initiative which helps homeless long term street drinkers live in dignity and address their

alcohol dependency without having to practice abstinence. Within the South West Wales region covering Swansea and Bridgend the organisation also provides a women-only project for single women and women with children fleeing domestic abuse who also have other complex needs, such as substance misuse or mental illness. Other specialist services include the VESTA project in Bridgend which provides accommodation and support to homeless men and women with a history of substance misuse often with a history of offending to support their addiction.

The SmartSkills pilot began in Swansea in 2004 and, when invited in 2006 to bid for funding to extend support to learners for progression work after achieving their awards, the Wallich decided instead to extend SmartSkills to Bridgend.

Despite some early difficulties (compounded by the original Swansea worker leaving and two periods of maternity leave for the SmartMove coordinator in 2005 and 2008) the SmartSkills service is now running successfully and at full capacity at both sites. The workers at both sites work predominantly with learners on a one-to-one basis, but also provide some group based learning and support which enhances and complements the one-to-one work. Both SmartSkills workers also undertake progression work with a number of learners after they have achieved their awards.

The characteristics of the learners vary between Swansea and Bridgend. Both pilots work with homeless people with a great deal of vulnerability including substance misuse and mental illness, but both workers suggested that the learners supported in Bridgend tend to have higher levels of needs, predominantly complex and multiple needs. Bridgend also supports a relatively high level of women, most of whom have been victims of either childhood abuse, domestic abuse or both.

The SmartSkills model has had a profound impact on the work of the organisation which has now embedded learning and personal development as a core element of its service delivery approach across all its projects. The Wallich has established itself as a City and Guild Centre in its own right (using the Profile of Achievement framework) and now employs a Head of Learning who leads on all client and staff learning. The organisation has built on its experience of delivering SmartSkills and recently launched (April 2009) a client learning programme, called The Way Forward across all the Wallich projects which open to all clients, and which is also accredited. It offers a range of options:

- 1 Work, education, training and activities
- 2 Communication
- 3 Accommodation
- 4 Managing money
- 5 You and the community
- 6 Relationships and other people
- 7 Personal skills
- 8 Drugs, including harm minimisation
- 9 Alcohol, including relapse prevention
- 10 Health

Both SmartSkills workers are also working towards NVQs in Advice and Guidance which are managed through the centre.

A further key feature of the two Welsh pilot sites is the application of a Solution Focused Development approach which has informed the delivery of the SmartSkills model at both sites. All Wallich staff in Swansea and Bridgend have been trained by a Solution Focused Therapist who worked in-house and provided training to all staff – this means that there is a consistent model of working which is applied across the different Wallich services, including the hostels, Bond Boards and tenancy support services, as well as by SmartSkills staff.

Unlike the other pilot sites the Welsh projects have also retained their Steering Group which meets annually and includes representation from Crisis, other partners, the staff and learners themselves. SmartSkills staff believe that this has played a valuable part in supporting both of the Welsh pilots and contributed to their successes.

Both sites expect to meet their targets of 12 people completing their Awards this year. The Swansea Bond Board supports 53 tenancies so this indicates that Swansea SmartSkills is typically working with about 20 per cent of the Bond Board's clients. The pattern is similar for Bridgend.

Performance data suggests that up to a quarter of learners progress to employment, and more than half progress to further education in the short term.

Barnet

Barnet SmartSkills is part of Threshold Housing Advice. This organisation runs two rent deposit schemes in Barnet; one is for non-statutory homeless clients and is funded by the council and the other is funded by Supporting People to work with current or former drug users and offenders (called the Foundation Project). SmartSkills is targeted at the latter group.

Threshold was successful in gaining SmartSkills funding in May 2005. This represented a new addition to the organisation's work which had previously been focused almost exclusively on housing and related support. It has since been successful in winning funding from Crisis to create volunteering opportunities linked to health and well-being, and would like to expand this aspect of its work.

The Foundation Project works with around 150 people per year. Of these around 20 engage with SmartSkills, which is 13 per cent of the overall caseload. There are three full-time support workers who each have a caseload of around 30 clients at any one time. By comparison the SmartSkills worker has a caseload of around five clients at any one time.

The qualifications framework used in Barnet is the Learn Power award. Learning support is largely delivered on a one-to-one basis although groups of learners come together for occasional trips out and for weekly yoga and relaxation sessions. The yoga sessions have been possible due to the skills and interests of the SmartSkills worker in this aspect of learning.

Performance data suggests the following outcomes:

- Three quarters gain the Learn Power award;
- At least 40 per cent progress onto more formal adult learning;
- A third begin volunteering; and
- Almost 20 per cent gain employment or become self-employed.

The SmartSkills worker has a background in supporting vulnerable people to engage in education and skills development having previously worked with people with a learning disability in a college setting and with Probation clients. Whilst working for SmartSkills she has also undertaken training as a counsellor and receives external supervision for this aspect of her work.

Canterbury

Canterbury experienced start up difficulties despite a strong initial proposal which secured funding in 2005 and the committed support of the SmartMove worker (who subsequently took on the SmartSkills worker role).

There were major difficulties with securing an accrediting body. Despite initial interest, neither Canterbury City College nor Thanet College were prepared to take on the accreditation role seemingly because of the low numbers involved and the potential attrition rate. It took nearly a year to resolve this, and in fact this fundamental problem was only resolved by Crisis becoming an accreditation centre in its own right enabling it to provide accreditation for the pilot.

There were also initial learner recruitment difficulties, partly as a result of potential learners being re-housed outside the centre of Canterbury.

The initial worker left after the first year and was replaced by the current post-holder who took over the role in July 2007.

The pilot is 'hosted' by Canterbury Housing Advice Centre, although few referrals come through this route. Most referrals in fact come through the Scrine Foundation, a local homelessness charity which provides hostel and direct access accommodation in Canterbury. The SmartSkills worker undertakes recruitment campaigns with a worker from Next Step, a local employment development project.

Canterbury is the only pilot which predominantly delivers its support through a group rather than one-to-one learning format (although one-to-one support is also provided). Modules are delivered in three regular sessions throughout the week, and the modules are selected by the worker based on the expressed interests, wishes and needs of the individual learners within each group. One of the difficulties faced by this pilot is the lack of accommodation space in which to undertake one-to-one work, which means that this is all undertaken in informal ad hoc settings such as local cafes.

The caseload pattern is typically five people participating in the group learning, with three other people receiving individual support. In 2008, the pilot supported approximately 20 people including 12 learners who completed their award.

Performance data suggests that:

- Around a third of learners progress to further education; and
- 40 per cent begin volunteering or actively seeking voluntary work.

Calderdale

Calderdale SmartMove has operated as a private sector access scheme for the last 10 years and now also supports people to access council and housing association housing. It currently works solely with single homeless people.

It received SmartSkills funding in 2006. Prior to this the organisation focused almost solely on housing and related support, and there was little experience in the organisation of the adult/further education sector. In the beginning it struggled to recruit learners, with only around 5 per cent take up from across SmartMove clients. There appeared to be more interest in learning that was focused upon tenancy management skills. Low interest was exacerbated by problems finding a college willing to undertake accreditation (which meant qualifications could not be delivered for some time), and turnover in key staff.

These initial problems now appear to have been largely ironed out. SmartSkills has recently gained more impetus from a partnership with the local foyer for young people that has led to co-delivery of learning across the clients of both organisations, and the opportunity for learners to be involved in the development of a community allotment. A structured course has been developed using prescribed Learn Power modules, which combines group learning with one-to-one support, and which is delivered over a nine week period. The service now has a designated 'learning zone' with access to computers and other resources for group or private study. Crisis now operates as the accreditation body.

Between 10 and 20 learners have engaged each year. Whilst achievement of the Learn Power award or progression to employment has been low to date, a high proportion of recent learners have progressed onto further education or volunteering.

Edinburgh

Edinburgh Cyrenians were awarded SmartSkills funding in 2007 which runs through to December 2009. Initially referrals were drawn from SmartMove projects in Edinburgh and West Lothian. However the Edinburgh funding contract with the local authority for the provision of SmartMove has recently been lost to a private sector provider, so the recruitment of learners has been extended to Falkirk which is covered by Falkirk SmartMove.

There have also been a number of changes in the staffing arrangements which have affected continuity and the recruitment of learners. Since the departure of the last worker in March 2009, the staffing approach has been changed so that the manager is now directly involved in working with learners along with two other members of staff.

There have also been difficulties throughout in recruiting learners, but since the change to include Falkirk, this has improved. The manager is now working with three

learners who are shortly due to complete their awards, plus a further four who are working actively on their modules. The two other members of staff are working with another three learners, so it is expected that overall 10 people will complete their awards this year. The manager is due to be seconded to another Cyrenians project in the near future, but is confident that these new arrangements will ensure continuity and that the award targets will be met.

This pilot is slightly different to the others in its format. All the support is delivered in a one-to-one situation, which is similar to other sites. However in Edinburgh there is a much greater focus on working with the learner in their own home. Staff generally work with the individual in their own home rather than a central location, or go to the learner's home to take the individual out with the aim of furthering a specific learning objective.

Most of the learners participating in Edinburgh SmartSkills are lonely, isolated, often depressed with low self esteem and motivation, relationship difficulties and low confidence. No one has explicit substance misuse problems or mental illness, although these do not in principle prevent access to the project, as people with such support needs are the Cyrenians' primary client group.

Stevenson's College provides accreditation and the relationship with the college works well.

Performance data suggests that over 50 per cent of all learners progress to further education or employment in the short term.



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