



FEANTSA

FEANTSA, the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless is an umbrella of not-for-profit organisations which participate in or contribute to the fight against homelessness in Europe. It is the only major European network that focuses on homelessness at the European level.



Empowering Ways of Working

Empowerment for people using homeless services in Europe

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While the concept of empowerment has gained popularity in the homeless sector over the last years, it is also a contested term. One service user once described empowerment as: "When we do all the work and when something goes wrong, you blame us".¹ Although this is clearly not the understanding of empowerment that is promoted in this document, the example reveals the risks of empowerment if it is done badly. It happens and it's not surprising that any user group will be suspicious of the motives behind.

This paper aims to provide a better understanding of empowerment in homeless services. Why is it important to think about empowerment? What does it mean to work in an empowering way? What are the challenges? The document focuses on homeless services as this is the level that is most likely to have a direct impact on the lives of people. It is addressed at the staff of services, the users as well as funding authorities. In addition, it may be interesting for other services that work with people experiencing homelessness and other vulnerable groups. It should be highlighted, however, that there are structural barriers to empowerment which will require broader changes in terms of policy and decision making processes that cannot be addressed within homeless services alone.

What is empowerment?

Empowerment can be described as a process by which individuals and groups enhance their capacity to

- Be informed,
- Make choices, and
- Transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes.

Empowerment therefore takes place at different levels, the individual and the group level. Empowerment implies moving away from an approach that sees people as mere recipients of charity to an approach that emphasises the rights and autonomy of people. Empowerment is linked to questioning existing power imbalances in a society (who has power, who doesn't, how is power obtained and how does power manifest itself) and ways to possibly redistribute power more equally.

The document first looks at the definition of empowerment. While acknowledging that empowerment is a challenge for both, service users and service providers, the document highlights the risks of services that are not concerned with empowerment. The paper then sets out practical examples of empowering ways of working. The examples are structured around three dimensions of empowerment: respecting rights and principles of working, facilitating access to resources and creating opportunities.

Finally, you will find recommendations for all relevant stakeholders, staff and management of services, service users, policy makers and funding authorities, to create an effective framework for services which are working in an empowering way.

This document is the third in a series of documents on participation and user influence following the FEANTSA Shared Values for Participation² and the FEANTSA Participation Toolkit³. It is based on contributions from the FEANTSA Participation Working Group, testimonies from staff and service users from different EU countries about their understanding of empowerment and working in an empowering way as well as other information resources on participation and empowerment of homeless people.

Individual level

At individual level empowerment aims to strengthen a person's capacity to control his/her own life again. Empowerment includes:

- Rebuilding self-confidence
- Being aware of one's possibilities and resources and being able to use and mobilise these
- Being able to engage with others and participate in social networks
- Taking up responsibilities.

Group level

In addition to the individual level, empowerment strengthens the capacity of people who are in a similar situation or share the same interests to come together as a group and take actions together. A homeless service user group, for

¹ Quote from service user in the UK.

² FEANTSA Shared Values of Participation, 2007. http://www.feantsa.org/files/Participation/policy%20statements/Final_Shared%20values%20for%20participation.doc

³ FEANTSA Participation Toolkit - "Redistributing the Power", 2007. http://www.feantsa.org/files/Participation/policy%20statements/EN-Final_toolkit.pdf

example, can support the empowerment of its members. A group can make it easier for people to share information and access resources.

In addition, groups facilitate the political empowerment of people. They are a way to call for broader changes in society and increase the objective power (political, cultural, social and economic) available to people. For example, a user group can channel the views of people experiencing homelessness and communicate these to a wider public.

The role of participation and support

Participation and support are important elements of empowerment. In relation to homelessness, participation can be defined as the effective involvement of people experiencing homelessness in service provision as well as in decision making processes affecting these services. Participation is a good way for people to develop their skills and self-confidence. It allows people to make new experiences and engage with other people in something meaningful. Without these opportunities for people to be involved, empowerment will not be possible. However, it is important that participation is voluntary. Homeless services should provide a framework that encourages participation but users should also have the right not to be involved (e.g. not to participate in a user meeting).

While empowerment focuses on enhancing the autonomy of people and groups, it does not exclude the need for support (financial, legal, psychological, social, health, employment etc.) What is crucial from an empowerment perspective, however, is how support is provided: Will the support increase or decrease the autonomy of a person? Will the support enhance the capacity of people to be informed and make effective choices?

What are the challenges?

Working in an empowering way is not a fixed methodology that can be easily applied. Empowerment challenges existing structures and traditional ways of doing things. To change these structures will require a real rethinking of how services are designed and run and not all might be convinced of the benefit immediately.

- There is a risk that reviewing services from an empowerment perspective will be perceived as a danger to a “comfortable” status quo rather than a real opportunity for improving ways of working that will be beneficial to all, service users, staff and the funding authorities.

- Working in an empowering way requires time and resources. In many homeless services, these resources are scarce and empowerment might be seen as an (desirable but currently unachievable) “extra” rather than a priority issue.
- “When we do all the work and when something goes wrong you blame us”: Changing ways of working might also be a challenge for users. People might have had bad experiences with “new participatory” methods that turned out to be tokenistic. Service users might also be afraid that speaking out loud will have a negative impact on the way they are treated.
- Finally, people might think that, in general, homeless services cannot be empowering for its users because they cannot provide for the most fundamental need of a person – a home. All efforts should therefore concentrate on finding housing for people. This will be the most empowering way of working.

Why is empowerment important?

The barriers to working in an empowering way are real and should be taken seriously. However, any homeless service that is not concerned with empowerment will quickly reach its limits and risks to violate the rights of its users. Instead of supporting homeless people on their pathway out of homelessness, these services will make people even more dependent on them and sustain their homelessness.

We talk about “institutionalisation” in order to describe a process where a person becomes accustomed to a life in an institution, such as a homeless service, so that it is difficult to resume to normal life after leaving. A person affected by institutionalisation becomes more and more passive, does not take own initiatives anymore and eventually is completely dependent on the support provided.

“[P]eople initially become dependent on professionals for specialist skills, gradually they become dependent on them for services which, in the past, people provided for themselves or for each other. The result is a state of social service dependency, social control, a loss of personal autonomy and the creation of needs in the client.”⁴

Institutionalisation does not only negatively impact on the self confidence and autonomy of service users. It also makes services more costly as it will prolong the time people will require support.



Disempowering ways of working may lead to frustration and ineffectiveness amongst the staff of homeless organisations and result in high levels of staff turnover or sick leave.

“I’m tired with the whole system; it is useless to try to get any help from there. They are stressed out and fed up with their job or something. They simply are not interested.”

Service user from Finland

The following testimonies illustrate different aspects and situations of “disempowerment”:

“I think the thing that really wears homeless people out is time. Always waiting, always being on the go, always on time, always doing something. I think this makes them really tired: ‘oooh, I have to hurry, if I do not get there by 5 this afternoon, I will not get my stuff from the locker, then I cannot go and take a shower because my soap and towel are in the locker. If I do not make it there before 5, I won’t get supper, then I will not eat anything tonight, only tomorrow’ But no one cares about this. And then they have to wait, and wait, and go to bed hungry, annoyed, and then other problems will come.”

Testimony of a service user in Hungary

“You get kicked out every morning at 8 a.m, whatever the weather, whether you are in good health or not; out you go. If you don’t have anywhere to go during the day, you walk up and down the streets for those bloody 8-9 hours before you will be let in again. And then you have to watch that you’ll be there before 11 p.m. So watch the last metro because that’s the only way you can get there! The door stays closed if you come too late. And if you come too late you have to stay out the night and you cannot get away from there to any other place because the last metro has gone.

And then there were these same guards that I had met in two other dormitories. After I had stayed away two nights, with my own daughter or with a friend, they said they wouldn’t let me in anymore

because there was no place left under my name. Still, all my things were left in the room. But they told me to go back to the centre, to a department of social services, to get a new recommendation paper for accommodation.

And when I tried to get that paper at nine o’clock in the evening, I’m told that no accommodation papers are delivered here, go to Sahaajankatu Shelter and get the paper from there [acute accommodation for homeless by City of Helsinki in another part of the town]. So the only thing to do is to hurry to the metro again and then walk from the metro to Sahaajankatu to the world’s end. My legs happened to be in such a shape that I almost could not walk at all, not forwards or backwards. But I made it.

And then at last at some minutes past 11 p.m. I got back to Myllypuro again. Then, at the shelter door the guard takes the accommodation paper and says, ‘ok-thank-you’, but he doesn’t let me in because it’s past 11 p.m.”

Testimony of a service user in Finland

“The way they handle their customers... e.g. I’m in an acute situation. PUFF. I’ve lost my money –somebody’s nicked or whatever. And I go to the desk. Let’s say it’s 12 a.m. They stonily tell me to come the next morning between 9 and 10 a.m. or to make a phone call. I try to call in the morning but don’t get through, and then I try the desk for making an appointment with the social worker. So, my own social worker is not there right now and nobody else will have me. I say, ‘you have a social worker in attendance for this kind of situation, I want to meet her’. I’m told, ‘no this is not how we act, you fill in this form for benefits, you send it there and they will make the decision in one week’. But I have medication to get, let’s say that my verification for payment of benefits has been nicked and I need my daily heart medication and so on. But I get nothing from there. And when I start to present my arguments two doorkeepers come and grab my sleeves and carry me out.”

Testimony of service user in Finland

Working in an Empowering Way

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Empowering ways of working aim to overcome the feeling of dependency of homeless people. Instead of viewing people as recipients of aid, they emphasise the rights of people and make them a part of the solution to homelessness. Rather than prescribing pre-fixed ideas about how the “problems” of people can be “solved”, empowering ways of working focus on providing support that helps people to take their life back into their own hands.

When working with a person, you always have to ask yourself: Will my action increase or decrease the person’s capac-

ity to be informed? Will it help a person to access relevant information and make effective decisions? Or is my action likely to decrease the chances of a person to become active and make an informed choice?

Working in an empowering way requires a holistic approach. However, for reasons of clarity we will distinguish three dimensions of empowering ways of working in this paper: Respecting rights and certain principles of working, providing resources and creating opportunities.

RESPECTING RIGHTS AND PRINCIPLES

A first dimension of working in an empowering way refers to the respect of rights of people and certain principles of working.

Treating people with dignity and respect

A homeless person is a human being and has human rights like everyone else. Although this should be obvious, it does not reflect the reality of many homeless people who suffer from stigmatisation and discrimination linked to their living situation. For people experiencing homelessness more important than the actual provision of support is sometimes the feeling of being heard and respected as an equally important and valuable person.

“Get to know the person you are working with from the start, really listen to them, make connections.”

Recommendation from National Group for People Who Use Simon Services

“ We should treat them equally even though they might see us as the authorities above, the so-called “working people; intoxicant free population”, as they sometimes say. But our job is to meet them half way or as close as possible considering the circumstances. At the first appointment, when we see the person, we are like person to person, and not patronizing, as we are equal adults.”

Testimony of social worker in Finland

“Many years ago when something not so nice had happened I met a person who said to me: ‘All the best things in life are simple and stupid.’ Somehow that holds true. You get strength from small things,

and they do not cost anything. They are easy to give to people, those little seeds, and something grows from them with time.”

Testimony of social worker in Finland

Being aware of power relations

People experiencing homelessness often have to rely on homeless services in order to fulfil the most basic human needs such as food and shelter. They are in an extremely vulnerable position and far away from an “autonomous consumer” that can effectively choose from a variety of services. Empowering services are aware of this imbalance of power between users and service providers at all times and actively seek to redistribute it more equally (see also, Involving people in finding solutions)

“Remember, people see staff as people with a lot more power than them. They can get them thrown out for example. Be aware that many of the people you will (key)work with think you are going to dictate to them. Again, be aware of power issues.”

Recommendation from National Group for People Who Use Simon Services

Giving people time

Many homeless people have had bad experiences with support services. At the same time, for many the staff of services are the main human contacts. It takes time for people to build up a relationship of trust again. People enjoy if you listen to them, talk about other things which are not directly linked to homelessness and see the person behind the “problems”.



"I like this day centre because they sit down with you and ask "How are you? Are you well? What's up? What have you done recently?"

Testimony of service user in Hungary

"The main point is to be seen, to be heard and to have a place where you know you're welcome. There's a place where you know you get help. Everything is as normal as possible, may the situation be whatever it is."

Testimony of social worker in Finland

"Give people time, lots of time."

Recommendation from National Group for People Who Use Simon Services

"The one with V. is one of the hardest interviews I've done since I've worked at the shelter. Not one of my strategies was successful. She tried till the end to provoke and exasperate me. I could see that she was suffering and the last place she wanted to be was there but I was not able to relax her and communicate. After that interview she entered the shelter but for weeks she was like a ghost: no contact with other guests or the workers; she just lived in her room. I knew that it needs time to have another chance, and so I waited for her at half way.

So it worked. After some weeks she made the first step. V. started to open up communication with a peer operator, and this was just the beginning."

Testimony of social worker in Italy

Respecting privacy and personal belongings

The lack of privacy and security is a major problem for people who are homeless. Services can facilitate the access to more privacy by providing a separate space for recording personal information and respecting the confidentiality of the information. In addition, the number of beds per room should be reduced to a minimum. It also helps to provide for a secure and personal space (e.g. lockers) where people can leave their belongings and papers while having access to it at all times.

"They have recently opened a place full of lockers which is really cool because people can leave their things there, they do not have to carry them all day long. This is really nice, especially when one has a lot of things. They give you a small locker, you lock it and you leave the key there. You can leave your things and do not have to fear that it will get stolen, that if one falls asleep everything will be gone by the time they wake up."

Testimony of service user in Hungary

The Permission Cycle

The following case demonstrates an example of how to deal with the referral into an emergency accommodation in an empowering way. The extract has been taken from an online forum for social workers.

"The main trick to 'empowering people' is to focus on not 'dis-empowering people' and work uphill from there. For example, if I was doing a simple referral for crisis accommodation with a homeless person, I would say 'Well, if you want crisis accommodation... what I want to propose is that I call service X and ask them what other services have bed space at the moment for someone your age and gender. Because they are the ones who know about who has what. Do you want me to go ahead with that?' Then they look at me as if I'm stupid and say 'Yes.' Then I get off the phone and then say 'They said there were three places that may be able to help out, the list is service a, service b, service c. Who do you think I should call first?' So the result is the person gets control over what can be controlled... the process. It's about handing information and decision making power over to them, even when there is a quicker way of doing it. You don't want to do it quickly... you want to disown power... if there is a decision = you don't want to make it yourself... you want to hand it to them and say 'this belongs to you... what do you want to do with it?' That way, you don't take power away from people by making decisions for them and dis-empower them. And in situations where people are suffering from a sense of extreme loss of power, it's best that even the most minute amount of power they have left be placed firmly in their court. That they get to have whatever is left. I call it 'The Permission Cycle.' The idea being that action can only be taken if the client gives permission for you to go ahead and take an action on their behalf... at each step in the process."

Post on homeless services forum. <http://www.homeless.org.au/forums/showthread.php?p=9022>

Involving people in finding solutions

People experiencing homelessness know best what experiences in their lives have been negative and challenging. They are therefore also the best person to know what could be a possible way forward that would bring about positive changes in their lives. For this, they need people who can explain the different options available but without patronizing or judging their decisions.

“We don’t push people to become religious or to make a change. We tell about choices, alternative solutions.”

Testimony of social worker in Finland

“Show someone all their options.”

Recommendation from National Group for People Who Use Simon Services

“In SAND one of the central rules in the organisation is that users define themselves what is important for them to have a good life. With this approach the

organisation explicitly challenges the “discourse of normality”, i.e. the idea that there is just one possible “normal” way of living. This also helps to challenge certain perceptions about homeless people. Although many people who are homeless will have substance abuse problems, they do not want to be reduced to this one element.”

Testimony of employee in SAND, Denmark

Recognising failure as part of a process

Working in an empowering way means to recognise the need for failure. Instead of just accepting it, failure should be seen as a natural and even positive part of a process. A failure allows people to learn from the experience and to get up again and give it another try.

“Don’t give up on a person, give them a second, third... chance.”

Recommendation from National Group for People Who Use Simon Services

FACILITATING ACCESS TO RESOURCES

A second dimension of working in an empowering way is about providing support that facilitates people’s access to resources, including material, social, financial and emotional resources.

Providing all information and being honest and clear about it

Some social workers feel that it is necessary to channel information for people experiencing homelessness in order to avoid overwhelming people with its complexity. Although this might be well intentioned, it often limits people’s access to important information resources and reinforces their feeling of dependency. To make effective choices, people need access to clear, consistent and up to date information about their rights, entitlements and available support. In addition, it is useful to explain to people their realistic chances about what solutions will be available in which timeframe (e.g. a dwelling). It is important not to raise too high expectations about something that is unlikely to happen.

“Be positive. But don’t promise anything you cannot deliver.”

Recommendation from National Group for People Who Use Simon Services

Ensuring a user friendly and pleasant environment

Many hostels are designed as traditional institutions with long and dark corridors and few open communal spaces. In some countries there have been increasing efforts to redesign and renovate these hostels and create a more pleasant, welcoming environment for both, service users and staff. Often service users have actively taken part in these initiatives. While some programmes have actually reshaped hostels altogether, also small changes can make a difference, such as improving the decoration of rooms together with service users etc.

- In the UK, “Places of Change Programme” has been a Hostels Capital Improvement Programme aimed at making hostels a place that will help people to move forward to work and a settled home. Projects included the renovation of hostels, integration of leisure facilities (e.g. sports facilities, kitchen for users...) or training and employment services into hostels.



“The Dawn Centre incorporates large open spaces where staff and users of services can freely move around. From the reception area all services can be easily accessed – accommodation, day centre facilities and primary health care. The accommodation provides single bedrooms with en-suite facilities; this has had an enormous effect both in terms of integrity and privacy for the users of the service, less violence and aggression against all who use the centre, and damage to the building itself, it has built respect from our customers and has changed the culture of the groups we work with.”⁵

Providing training

Many people experiencing homelessness find it difficult to clearly express their needs and concerns and to deal with different stakeholders. Very low threshold trainings, such as life-skills training, can help people to regain self-confidence, learn to express their concerns and deal with conflicts that may arise.

- St Mungo’s in the UK provides Independent Living Training to their users. The aim is to prepare people for independent living and to provide them with the skills and knowledge they need to have control over their own lives. The programme focuses on three main areas; financial skills (dealing with bills, managing money and debts), social skills/personal development (assertiveness, dealing with neighbours, managing change, healthy eating, looking after yourself, employment issues) and tenancy skills (benefits, furnishing, tenancy issues).⁶

Strengthening social networks

Social networks are an important resource for people experiencing homelessness. Services should support people in rebuilding and strengthening the contact with family and friends. It is useful to involve a person’s social network in the development of possible solutions.

In the Netherlands, the «Eigen Kracht Conferentie» (‘Own Strength Conference’) is a model of Family Group Conferencing. The underlying philosophy of this method is that a social network, when given all relevant information, are better able to devise plans to protect their own welfare than are professionals, because social networks know themselves — their problems, strengths and resources — better than professionals do. In an ‘Eigen Kracht Conferentie’, the service user comes together with his/her family, friends and neighbours and talks about his/her situation and possible ways forward. The conference is organised on the request of the service user and is facilitated by an independent coordinator. The “Eigen Kracht Centrale” in the Netherlands has a number of independent coordinators that can be requested.

Accessing financial resources

Access to financial resources is an important part of being able to make effective decisions. However, many people experiencing homelessness have no or very little own financial resources. What is more, they are not necessarily aware of their rights to benefits and/or have major difficulties in accessing these. It is therefore crucial for homeless services to inform people about all their rights and entitlements and support them in accessing these. In addition, access to work is a way for people to earn money and move towards financial independence.

- In Belgium, an online information system helps people to access their correct benefits. People enter their profile in the online system (e.g. current employment and housing situation) and receive an overview about their entitlements and rights. They can take this printout to the social services and use it as a reference.⁷
- The homeless newspaper in Copenhagen, Hus Forbi, provides homeless people with the possibility to earn some additional income as vendors.⁸

⁵ Testimony of Dawn Centre Manager in DCLG: “Places of Change: Tackling homelessness through the Hostels Capital Investment Improvement Programme”, 2006, p. 12. <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/housing/pdf/152564.pdf>

⁶ http://www.mungos.org/services/recovery_from_homelessness/independent_living_training/

⁷ www.rechtenverkenner.be

⁸ <http://www.husforbi.dk/>

Evaluating services

The feedback of service users on the performance of services is not only useful for the service which will be able to identify the support needs of people. It is also a way for people to express their concerns and needs. It is important that services make clear how they will respond to the evaluation of service users so that people see the impact.

- The project St Basil's by Shelter in the UK frequently uses questionnaires to check how its services are perceived by users. These can be returned, either with contact details or anonymously. At the resettlement centre, responses are posted to issues raised in anonymous questionnaire on the 'check back board', to ensure that users know their concerns are being dealt with. If questionnaires are not anonymous, a worker will contact the user to discuss the issues raised.⁹

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES

A third dimension of working in an empowering way is about creating opportunities for people to become active, take up different roles, participate in peer working and engage in employment and occupational activities.

Taking up different roles

The attribute "homeless" reduces the complexity of a human being's life to one element. Taking up different roles that help people to identify with something else than homelessness can be a very empowering experience:

Being a care - giver

Especially for men, who are usually not given the opportunity to see their children, it is an empowering experience to be a father and to re-engage with their children.

- A hostel in Antwerp in Belgium has made it possible for homeless men to see their children on weekends at the premises of the service.

Being an artist

Being creative and expressing yourself through art is another example for empowering ways of working. Art encourages people who may otherwise have difficulties to express themselves, to demonstrate their creative skills and also to receive recognition for it.

- There are numerous examples of art projects for homeless people throughout Europe, including homeless theatre, homeless artists associations and art classes.

Being a football player

Participation in sports events, such as a football tournament, can be empowering. People have the opportunity to show their capabilities and possibly to see immediate success. This may become the starting point for an ongoing empowerment process.

- A famous example is the Homeless World Cup in football that takes place every year in another country of the world. But even a tournament within a hostel or other homeless service can already be a joyful and motivating experience.

Being a friend

Buddying schemes give people who are homeless the chance to be in contact with people outside the homelessness context and to establish a social network. This helps people to move away from the isolation that is often connected to homelessness and to enjoy life again. A social network will also facilitate people moving on to independent living as isolation and lack of social relations remains one of the main factors why people relapse into homelessness.

- The Finnish organisation VVA (Vailla Vakinaista Asuntoary) owns a place on the Vartiosaari Island which is renovated and run by service users. Staff as well as homeless people can go and spend some time together, go fishing, renovate the house or make boat trips.

⁹ Example described in Shelter: "Involving users in supported housing: A good practice guide", 2005, p. 18.



Being responsible and making decisions

Being able to make your own decisions is at the core of empowerment. Taking up even small responsibilities gives people a chance to gain new self-confidence and to engage with others.

Participate in hostel management

Many service users enjoy participating in the management of the hostel they are living in, including social work but also gardening, laundry, cooking etc.

- In the Ursula Heim in Offenburg in Germany two former service users are part of the team of social workers with the same rights and obligations.

Organise trips and visits

Organising and participating in even small trips is an empowering experience for people. People break out of their daily routine, get to know new people and learn about other approaches and experiences.

- In the UK, Groundswell is promoting exchanges between homeless people from different organisations. Smaller groups of people visit each other in their organisations, exchange experiences and practices and thus create an informal network.¹⁰
- In the Danish user organisation SAND, the chair of the international working group organised a trip to the Finnish organisation VVA (Vailla Vakinaista Asuntoa ry). In cooperation with the Finnish partner he organised the content of the visit, the itinerary and made sure that participants received all the practical information about the travel.

Organise events

The organisation of events, such as an exhibition, a theatre evening or a party in a hostel, is a good way for service users to do something meaningful together.

- In Spain, service users and staff of the Fundacion RAIS in Murcia organise a street festival every year together.

- In Germany, service users from all over the country meet every year at the "Berbertreffen" in Offenburg. While the main aim of the meeting is to facilitate social exchanges between the people, there are also workshops and discussions on various political topics.

Organise service user meetings

Service user meetings are a vital element of effective participation in a homeless service. They should be organised as much as possible by users themselves, including time, place, agenda...

- In a hostel for young people who are homeless (18-25 years old) in Bruges in Belgium user meetings are led by the service users themselves. The meetings serve to organise activities in the hostel and the housekeeping.
- The Simon Community in Leeds/UK has set up service users meetings that are tailored to the needs of their users. In practice, this has meant holding the meetings in fast-food restaurants in the evenings. No formal written invitations were issued, but word is passed on through the hostels and on the street. Staff provide some of the agenda items, but users are encouraged to add their own concerns. A meal and a drink are provided for those attending the meeting.¹¹

Manage a budget

Accessing financial resources and managing a budget is crucial. It allows service users to demonstrate and develop their financial skills, being creative and implement their ideas.

- In a hostel in Kortrijk in Belgium the housekeeping budget is managed by the users. Every week service users receive a budget for the food and they decide on their own how to use the budget, what will be the menu, where to buy the food etc.
- Groundswell in the UK offers small grants to homeless people who have an idea for a project but require the funding to do it. Over the last years the organisation has thus helped many homeless people to put their ideas into practice.

¹⁰ More information is available in the Groundswell toolkit « Exchanges : the rough guide ». For more information, visit www.groundswell.org.uk

¹¹ Example described in Shelter: "Involving users in supported housing: A good practice guide", 2005, p. 15.

Taking up statutory responsibilities

Becoming a member of an organisation and taking up statutory responsibilities (for example, becoming a board member) can be empowering for people.

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- In the Danish user organisation SAND, the board consists of people who are homeless. They are working together, encourage each other and develop the activities of the organisation.
 - In the Finnish organisation VVA (Vailla Vakinaista Asuntoa ry), service users become members of the organisation. As a member they have the right to vote and to influence action. They also can be elected as a board member and participate in staff meetings.
 - Service users are also represented on the boards of some service provider organisations, such as the board of directors of the Simon Communities in Ireland.

“By becoming involved with the Simon I have been placed in different situations and met many new people, this has been ‘character building’ for me (a euphemism for something that hurts). I hope I have shown others that the fact that I was once homeless does not mean I am unable, with the help of the housed community, to return and be a useful member of that community.”

Brian Brady, member of the Board of Directors of the Simon Communities 2005-2006.¹²

Designing services

Homeless people can be involved in the design of new services.

- In Finland, a group of (former) homeless people from the organisation VVA (Vailla Vakinaista Asuntoa ry) took part in a competition together with the Y- Foundation and designed a supported housing unit for 50 people.

Doing political work

Organising and participating in political activities is empowering for people.

- In Belgium, 100 homeless service users organised a meeting at the Belgian coast in January 2007. At the meeting, the participants were divided into 10 different workshops. Every group focused on one issue in relation to homelessness and prepared a political statement. This was followed by a plenary session where the different proposals were presented and discussed. The key points were drawn together in a document that was presented at a press conference the next day. All presentations at the press conference were done by the participants themselves.
- In Denmark, several homeless service users are members of the Council for Socially Excluded People, which works as an advisory body for the Danish government on issues in relation to poverty and social affairs.
- In Germany, the Bundes Betroffenen Initiative e.V. (BBI), the national federation of homeless people, was created in 1995. It aims to represent the interests of homeless people to the federal government, political parties, NGOs and the wider public in general. The BBI, in cooperation with the regional network for the Land Baden-Wuerttemberg, is member of different statutory bodies at regional and national level. It sits on the board of the German Federation of homeless services, BAGW, and is represented in five different working groups of the BAGW.

Peer working and building networks

Peer working can be empowering for people. By sharing experiences with people who are or have been in a similar situation, people feel more comfortable and are more likely to open up and really talk about their concerns. There are many possible ways to organise peer working.

Providing support to others

Many people experiencing homelessness enjoy supporting other people who are in a similar living situation. People like it because for once it is not always about them and their own problems. They feel that with their experience they can contribute something positive to the lives of others. Peer support does not necessarily need a formal structure. However, it can be useful to clearly integrate peer support as an element of social/key work in an organisation.

12 Quote taken from the FEANTSA Magazine « Homeless in Europe », autumn 2006, p. 4.



- In the Finnish organisation VVA, service users take part in peer support and run their own day centre. As peer supporters they engage with other homeless people, discuss about their problems and experiences, provide support and/or give advice on what kind of other support is available.

“I am not proud of my past but I think it can be useful when helping others. My past is full of failures and difficulties: I would not recommend anyone to take the same path I had chosen. My way of life, my approach has changed a lot – I am not ashamed to admit that alone I would not have had a chance – thanks to many people who cared for me. This is what I want to give to others as well.”

Participant of peer support in Finland

- The organisation Novas Ouvertures in the UK has actively encouraged the recruitment of residents’ representatives at a number of their projects. These representatives act as advocates for individuals, and liaise with staff locally and at an organisational level. Their role is to articulate complaints or represent other service users as advocates at appeal.¹³
- Already in 1999, Wilhelm Rosenberg, a (formerly) homeless person who was trained as a carer for elderly people, set up a medical service for service users in the Ursula Heim in Offenburg/Germany. While the service closely cooperates with local doctors and the local social services, the basic medical care (e.g. distribution of medication, bathing of patients) is provided by (formerly) homeless people.

Setting up and facilitating user organisations

Being part of a group can be empowering. People feel that they are not alone and are able to act together. When working with groups it is important to get the balance right between providing support to the group and leaving enough space and freedom for the group to develop at their own pace and the way they think is best. While for some people, it is important that there is an external facilitator who helps the group to get organised, it can also be important to leave autonomy to service users’ own initiatives.

- Bonjour, a small user organisation in Belgium, was set up to provide visits to service users who are currently in hospitals. Bonjour provides emotional as well as very practical and administrative support to people (e.g. provide hygienic articles).

In Hungary, VAGYUNK is an organisation of homeless artists that regularly organise exhibitions for its members.

“Our association works because its members make it work! If we are offered an exhibition hall we grab the opportunity immediately. We set up our best paintings and even organise a show to launch the exhibition. We want to show the whole world what we are capable of, even if we do not have a permanent home.”

Csilla, president of VAGYUNK (“We exist”), a homeless artists association in Hungary

Occupational activities and employment

Taking up employment, including supported employment, that is adapted to the needs and aspirations of people can be very empowering. For people who are currently not ready for employment, volunteering and meaningful occupation can help to develop skills and self-confidence. There are various examples of employment initiatives for people experiencing homelessness throughout Europe. Some of them are organised in cooperation with external employers but there are also examples of organisations that provide employment and meaningful occupation opportunities within their organisation.¹⁴

Some examples:

- In the Sankt Ursula Heim in Offenburg, Germany, two low threshold employment services are managed by former homeless people. Each of the projects works with 8 – 12 people; one with men and the other with women. Participants can choose their own level of engagement in the activities, ranging from renovation, flea markets, social services to art work. There are no sanctions if people do not show up for work.

¹³ Example described in Shelter: “Involving users in supported housing: A good practice guide”, 2005, p. 17.

¹⁴ For more information about good practice examples of employment for people experiencing homelessness, visit the website of the FEANTSA Employability Forum: <http://feantsa.horus.be/code/EN/pg.asp?Page=1155>

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- Another interesting initiative in Germany is “Bauen, Wohnen, Leben” in Cologne. Over the course of several years service users renovated old military barracks and constructed 46 housing units for 150 inhabitants.¹⁵
- In Finland, Mental Health organisations have organised an “experience research school”. A group of people experiencing homelessness were trained as peer researchers. They will be responsible for interviewing users of homeless services and will be paid for this. The information will be used by the Finnish government for the development of the National Homelessness Strategy.
- In the Italian organisation Piazza Grande in Bologna, homeless people are working in different workshops (e.g. bicycle repair, tailoring, street magazine).

Testimonies collected by Leonardo Tancredi, Piazza Grande, Italy

L. is 46 years old and is today responsible for a workshop in the organisation Piazza Grande. L. has a history of substance abuse and a criminal record. The first contact with Piazza Grande was through a “job scholarship” (“borsa lavoro”) that he received from the local social services. Despite ongoing drug use, L. was able to use his mechanic skills and take up more responsibilities. He now works full-time in the organisation and makes his own living. He is ambitious and would like to earn more money that will help him to live a quiet life when he is older.

A. is 44 years old and responsible for a workshop in Piazza Grande. Like L., she has a history of drug addiction and a criminal record. After a period of street homelessness, Anna turned to the local social services to ask for shelter. The social services referred her to Piazza Grande where she took part in an employment assistance programme. Although she had no previous experience with the job that she is requested to do, she learned how to do it. Now she is managing the workshop and is also responsible for a second hand clothes shop, together with two other formerly homeless women. A. says herself that she felt empowered when she could take over the responsibility for the workshop and got a home for herself.

G is 55 years old and plays a responsibility role in the organisation. G. had a very difficult childhood and only got out of prison when he was 33 years old. Discharged from prison he became homeless. In 1993, Giorgio was one of the founding members of the Piazza Grande street magazine. This has been a real turning point for him. The responsibilities in the magazine made him proud of himself. He enjoyed representing the organisation in public meetings and towards the media and politicians. Although he never completely overcame some of his problems, he feels he is owner of his own life again.

- In Hungary, people are volunteering in the street paper or participate in training to become a cook.

“It was good because we really learnt things. And of course it is also an important factor how much one earns. If I could sell myself well to a place that pays a good salary that would be a great stepping stone.”
Participant of a training course for cooks, BMSZKI, Hungary

“About six months ago, the street paper was recruiting volunteers. I did not hesitate for one instance when I was asked if I wanted to help out. Since then, once a week I am on duty from 9- 12am. I give out permits for the vendors and record their complaints and suggestions. It is a bit like social work! On Fridays I distribute the paper to the vendors which is a financial responsible position. I have to record how many issues I give out and have to collect their payment. I get paid for this. So many good things have happened to me lately. But this does not mean that I am overall very happy.”

Testimony of service user, Fedél nélkül street paper, Hungary

- At the Kofoed’s School in Copenhagen, Denmark, service users are “students”. The school aims to help the students to develop their own strengths and self-esteem. Kofoed’s School students can participate in a variety of training and education projects, including music classes, languages, mechanical work, woodwork, etc. Students and staff develop all activities of the school together.

¹⁵ <http://www.bauenwohnenarbeiten.de/start>



A Framework for Empowerment

The examples illustrate the different dimensions of working in an empowering way and the important role that homeless services can play to promote the empowerment of their users.

However, there are structural barriers to empowerment which will require broader changes in terms of policy and decision making processes that cannot be addressed within

homeless services alone. What is more, service users can play an active role in supporting organisations in changing their ways of working.

The following recommendations are addressed to the different stakeholders and aim to provide a framework for services that work in an empowering way.

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Recommendations

Recommendations for homeless services management and staff

1. Develop an empowerment strategy for your organisation, together with service users, management and frontlines workers. This should include a common understanding of empowerment and ways to promote it. Everyone in the organisation should be aware of this and know what their responsibilities in relation to empowerment are.
2. Develop an evaluation framework for empowerment in your organization together with service users, management and frontline workers. Evaluations should take place at least once a year.
3. Make sure you provide opportunities for empowerment to every individual service user that is appropriate to them.
4. Make sure empowerment opportunities are available to all people equally, irrespective of gender, ethnic background, sexual orientation, religion, disability,
5. Prepare welcome packs for homeless people who enter your service, informing them about their rights, the house rules, available services and possible complaint procedures
6. Plan to invest resources (e.g. time) to enable your organisation to revise and change your ways of working.
7. Make empowerment a regular agenda point for meetings (e.g. team meetings, user meetings) in your organisation.
8. Use your networks to exchange good practices on empowerment.
9. Review design and furnishing of services in order to create a pleasant place that combines increased privacy for users and communal spaces.
10. Stop being defensive.

Recommendations for service users

1. You are responsible for your own life. Only you can change it but you can ask for help if you feel that you need it.
2. Make sure that you ask all questions that you have.
3. Take up opportunities for engagement and/or make suggestions to make these more useful and interesting for service users.
4. Say what you think even if not all will agree with you and let other people say what they think as well.
5. Don't give up and always try to find a solution to a problem even if you are not receiving the support you would like to have.
6. Stop being defensive.

Recommendations for setting up and facilitating service user meetings

1. Provide a peer facilitator who has been trained for this purpose. He/she should "make it easier" for people to participate. The peer facilitator should be independent and not part of the staff or the service users.
2. Peer facilitator should go to the service before the meeting and talk to service users and put up posters and flyers. It is useful to have a series of meetings with the same peer facilitators until people feel ok to run their own meetings.
3. Everyone in the meeting should be regarded as equal. Power issues should be discussed.
4. Try to find out the best time for people to attend and provide clear information about timing, venue, refreshments and ways to get there.
5. It is useful to put up posters and distribute information about the meeting and what you intend to do after the meeting.

6. An agenda should be prepared together at the start of the meeting.
7. The provision of childcare facilities during the meeting can be very important.
8. The meeting should start with the presentation of all participants. An 'icebreaker' game can make this easier.
9. The meeting should end with a feedback session. Everyone should have the opportunity to say what they liked/did not like about the meeting. All feedback should be respected. Negative feedback should be responded with positive feedback or proposals to improve this issue in the future.
10. Long meetings should have breaks every hour.
11. Participation has to be free choice. Nobody should be forced to come back a second time if they don't feel like it.
12. Promote that it is in the service users' best interest to attend the meeting. If you find it difficult to get people to come, a small incentive could possibly be offered (e.g. 5 euros etc.)
13. On request of the service users, get a member of staff into the meeting in order to answer any questions and listen to proposals brought up by the meeting.

Recommendations for service users who would like to set up a user-organisation

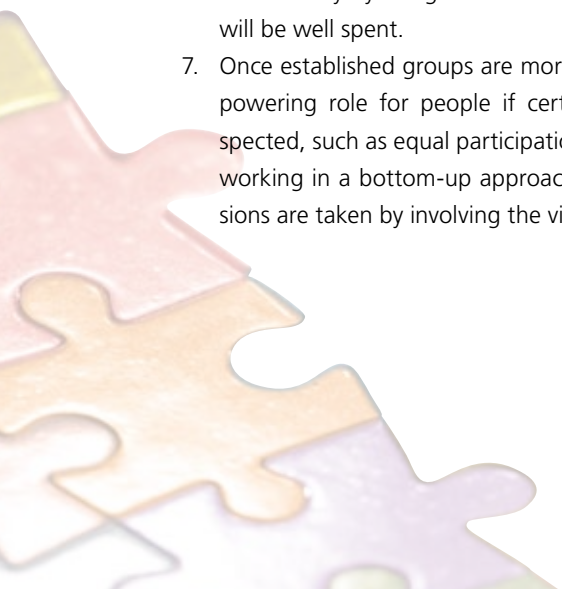
1. Discuss with other users about your idea.
2. Clearly define the aims and goals of your organisation or initiative.
3. Seek advice from organisations that have been established already and staff.
4. Think about possible sources of funding.
5. Make allies with politicians and other influential personalities who could help with the funding and promotion of your cause.
6. Let funding bodies know that they will get value for their money by using service users and that the money will be well spent.
7. Once established groups are more likely to play an empowering role for people if certain principles are respected, such as equal participation of all members and working in a bottom-up approach to ensure that decisions are taken by involving the views of all.

Recommendations for funding authorities

1. Ensure that sufficient funding is available which allows services to work in an empowering way.
2. Funding should include resources for training, user initiatives, restructuring and renovation of premises...

Recommendations for policy makers

1. Promote the creation of services that are adapted to the needs and aspirations of people experiencing homelessness.
2. Ensure that homeless people can enjoy their citizenship rights (e.g. right to vote).
3. Develop policies that regard people experiencing homelessness as equal people. Policies must not differentiate between "deserving" and "undeserving" poor or directly or indirectly criminalise people (e.g. banning of rough sleeping or drinking in public spaces)
4. Involve service user representatives in the development, implementation and evaluation of policies that have an impact on people experiencing homelessness, including homelessness strategies, employment and social policies etc.
5. Tackle the structural causes and trigger factors of homelessness and provide adequate, long-term housing solutions for people experiencing homelessness.





Further reading

If you wish to know more about possible ways to promote empowerment and participation in your country, please consult previous publications on related issues:

- Annex to this publication: Testimonies of service users and staff on empowerment.
- Shared Values for Participation; available in English, French and German:
- Participation Toolkit; available in English, French, German, Spanish and Polish
- Compendium of interesting practices and information resources; available in English and French

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You can access these resources at:

<http://www.feantsa.org/code/en/theme.asp?ID=34>

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- relaying the views of the stakeholders and society at large.

For more information see:

http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/progress/index_en.html

The information contained in this publication does not necessarily reflect the position or opinion of the European Commission.

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