

## Opening the doors: Homeless people and libraries

### Introduction

A partnership of organisations wants to improve access to reading, learning and information services for and with homeless and vulnerably housed people in public libraries, and to ensure that library services are available for homeless people in a way that is appropriate and meets the needs of service users, particularly those in priority need including young people who suffer particular disadvantage.

The partnership consists of:

London Libraries Development Agency (LLDA)

Homeless Link

Look Ahead

Library services in the London Boroughs of Brent, Bromley, Camden, Hackney, Lambeth and Southwark

St Mungo's, Crisis, Brent Homeless User Group (B-HUG) and Quaker Homeless Action have also been consulted in the preparation of this proposal and may become involved in the project in a more active way as it develops.

Details of each partner and their interest in the project is provided at appendix 1.

The project will develop and test models of practice that can be mainstreamed by other library service providers, on the assumption that there will be little or no additional resource requirements. We aim to develop models of transferable practice.

### What is the need?

LLDA was aware of an interest in developing library services from organisations in the homelessness sector, and commissioned user research in summer 2006. There are a small number of examples of library based projects working with homeless people (eg Blackburn with Darwen's Books On The Edge project) and we seek to build on existing evidence and achievement and develop a sustainable offer that any library service could adopt with minimal resourcing.

Some hostels and day centres for homeless people support reader and writer development, basic skills and IT learning opportunities, and in a number of hostels, including those provided by Look Ahead, user-run library services have been developed. This provided us with initial evidence that, presented in the right way, there is a demand for books, reading and library services.

Many homeless people have multiple disadvantage – including drug use, alcohol use, mental health problems. Lack of meaningful occupation and activity may exacerbate these, and may contribute to failures to adhere to treatment regimes or positive move on to more secure permanent accommodation.

We interviewed small samples of homeless service users, and focus groups were conducted to gauge interest and knowledge with homeless and vulnerably housed people, and also with library staff in two authorities. Fieldwork was carried out by B-

HUG with support from Look Ahead, Homeless Link and LLDA. The research should be treated with caution owing to the small sample size, but it indicates a general interest in, and enthusiasm for, libraries, but barriers to access include complex or impenetrable joining procedures/ID requirements, membership rules and a lack of understanding of what libraries offer.

It was clear that there was no tangible sense of a library 'offer' for homeless people and some examples were quoted of staff or other users making homeless people feel uncomfortable.

Users were, however, positive about libraries, and indicated some of the ways library services could offer more relevant and accessible services. These included:

- leisure based classes and activities
- targeted help with job-seeking
- tailored information and advice from government, local government and voluntary organisations with a local flavour and a strong awareness of specific resources eg supporting homeless people's use of Choice Based Lettings through library PCs
- help with using IT – particularly the internet – with dedicated/peer support workers
- volunteering opportunities - clients seek volunteering opportunities to help overcome some of the problems associated with homelessness and often want to work specifically in a homelessness context (see also Bowgett, Kate: *Homeless people and volunteering*, EQUAL, May 2005)
- involving homeless people as ambassadors for the service or consultants on improving it

We also interviewed staff in Brent and Camden library services, who identified a need and duty to support homeless people, but a lack of confidence and knowledge in their ability to communicate and assess needs effectively. They also recognised that they need to manage and resolve potential conflicts that may arise, for example when new users of library services use library premises and facilities in a way that may appear challenging to existing users. A major element of the project will therefore be to capacity build and address change issues within libraries.

### **Project plan**

We aim to start work on the project in January 2008 and conclude by December 2009 at the latest. The project will be flexible in its outcomes and timings according to need, and according to our agreements with funders. A final report detailing outcomes and recommendations for further action will be published in early 2010.

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