



Housing conference

The cuts October 2011.

Thanks Chris, both Chris and I are part of HUG which represents people with a mental health problem in the highlands.

We have been anticipating cuts for, I don't know how many years now, and have regularly consulted our 450 members on the subject.

When I think of cuts, like Chris, I do not make a distinction between income or services or UK decisions and Scottish ones or regional planning, what I think of, is the impact of what we are slowly beginning to realise is happening or will happen.

I suppose the majority of our members feel exposed to a sustained assault on themselves, one which they wish to resist with all they can but one which they and those of us who are meant to represent them sometimes feel powerless to do anything about.

The feeling of inevitability and helplessness is almost impossible to overcome and the vacuum in which we operate makes us feel incompetent. The blunt statements from everyone that there is no money and it is us who have to bear the burden of this inspires both intense anger and, in the absence of any meaningful alternative to align ourselves with, something that can often approach despair.

We have known for so long that welfare reform is coming, we have heard politician after politician and telly program after program lambasting the scroungers and benefits cheats that somehow our members so clearly are, in modern culture. We hear our wish to work and contribute hijacked by political parties who are completely unaware of the intricacies of getting back into work from the devastation that mental illness can be. And nowadays, we hear claims of how many people never were unable to work after all, without reference to the fact that if you shift the goalposts and the qualifying criteria you can make anything fit the rhetoric and,



when we hear this, some of us panic, some of us react stoically, some of us feel like giving in and some of us do indeed agree with the rhetoric and agree that many people on benefits claim them needlessly.

In terms of benefits cuts I have heard of a single mother losing all her benefits and trying to survive on £20 a month for her food and clothing for her and her children, I have heard of another person losing all his benefits against the evidence of his cpn and doctor and having to borrow money off of friends and acquaintances to keep somewhere to live. I have heard of people who have been advised to sell their houses and I have heard of a person who asked what he should do because his doctor was telling him he definitely shouldn't work and the benefits agency were saying he should. The benefits agency said he should feel free to ignore his doctor's advice.

I hear people confronted by ignorant assessors for their reviews and, I hear of attempts to trick them and of anxiety and fear that leads to relapse and throughout this, I hear of fantastic work being done for the stream of claimants who seem to routinely have their claims rejected and then reinstated when the citizens advice bureau helps them.

It makes me very angry to see what is happening – it makes me angry to see the process of welfare reform happening in a mist of ignorance – few of us know what will really happen or understand the changes but the majority of our members, people who are living on the margins of income and acceptance are fully expecting to lose more and more income and be forced step by step into the very conditions that caused so many of them to implode and collapse in the first place.

And with cuts in our services, sometimes I wish that the authorities could be honest. I get sick of hearing of officials trying to explain that the cuts we face are fair and justified, that the people who had high packages of care suddenly have their needs reassessed in some objective way and low and behold in these times of austerity we find that people left, right and centre never needed the packages of support that they have come to rely on. Just as people were once told that they would get a certain benefit for life because of the severity of their condition are now being reassessed for their



benefits, so they are being also being reassessed for the very support they get. Why on earth couldn't these people be honest and principled and agree that their reassessments have nothing to do with need and everything to do with budgets – it may make us angry, it may mean we have something to argue against but it least it would be ethical and true.

In the Highlands we know the cuts will be awful and will affect everyone. We have been told it again and again, we have also been told that there is nothing that we can do about it; that the NHS and the Council's hands are tied as are the government's and well, what do you do then? The evidence of real terrible cuts has not reached us yet, hours of support are being whittled away, appointments become less frequent, workers who leave are not replaced for months, if at all, budgets stretch to creaking in all sectors that provide care and stupid things happen such as support workers having to come to us by public transport so that over half their time with us is spent travelling to meet us. And of course means testing is rearing its head more and more.

One of the paradoxes of mental health services is that while some of us are desperate for help many of us are suspicious or even hostile to the services we get and so when it becomes harder to access services and when we are asked to pay for something we are not even sure we wanted in the first place we have the beginnings of something deeply unhealthy.

Our members with the exception of those who are resigned to the loss of services that they rely on for their very wellbeing want us to campaign wherever we can; to lobby our mps', our msp's and our councillors and our officials . They want us to march and go to the press but when we think to ourselves where the savings could be made if we do not bear some part of the burden we can find ourselves lost and confused and unsure.

I cannot think of a time in the past 15 years that HUG has existed when we have joined in, in planning meetings when we have looked at strategy and policy, when officials have not started meetings by saying that there is no new money but that by looking at services in a new way we could improve what we do. That old fallacy that by increasing community services we decrease the need and expense of hospital services has been trotted out so many times that I am sick of it and I am sick of being constantly



Told to be creative in ways that are unachievable and only cause us to tighten our belts further.

Being creative with impossibly stretched budgets can be described in the following personal way, for the last five or so years a collection of our members put aside five hours every other Friday to meet with officials, pore through complex consultation documents, speak to other groups, generally to volunteer to make the world a better place. Five years ago we would buy them a sandwich at lunch time which tended to cost about £2.50, two years ago we realised we couldn't afford this so we bought loaves of bread and cheese and made our own sandwiches at a cost of about £1.00 a person (remember this is the reward for 5 hours solid work) now we are thinking maybe we should charge our members for lunch or ask them to bring in their own lunches. This is what thinking creatively about budgets means nowadays.

I am sorry, all this makes me so angry and you should be angry too, there is nothing wrong with being a director of social work, a government official, a politician or a support worker and being openly angry about what is happening and is bound to get worse. You can be vocal and angry and still look for what have to be horrible solutions. What I dislike is those people who are so blind or so hypocritical that they believe that services will actually improve with diminished investment.

Services can improve hugely but even those shifts in culture and attitude require investment and that investment should not be at the expense of what we have already.

Last year we held our own exercise to look at what creates a sense of wellbeing in our community and whether it could be done at little cost; a way of saying "lets try to face reality head on."

On the face of it the true ingredients of wellbeing for us cost so little.

They are things like having hope, like having something to believe in, whether this be a cause or a spiritual belief.

We talked about learning to see life in positive ways, to celebrate the grass and the rain, the sight of the sea on the horizon, sitting by a mountain stream.



We talked about walking together and as we walked, talking and sharing and then we talked about walking alone and contemplating from a place of quietness.

We talked about how much we can offer each other, the gesture that is implied in making someone a cup of tea, of crossing the room to sit beside someone who cannot bring themselves to talk or smile. Of the laughter we can have when we share macabre experiences of detention and hospital and prison. We talked about the power of connection and friendship and support from those that really 'get it' because they too have been there.

We talked about learning to budget, to grow our own vegetables, to watch the electricity bills, we talked about going round to each others houses and sharing food and tea.

We talked about learning yoga and searching for quietness and peace. We talked of the power of words and expression, of poetry and painting and song.

We talked of so much but I will not list it all here.

There are a few lessons to learn from this.

The first is the fact that what makes a real difference in our life is the same stuff that makes a difference in everyone else's life, it is the simple inexpensive things we do that transform our lives but of course it is the simple inexpensive things that cost so much to find. If we already know the solution why don't we find it? And why don't people provide it? And anyway, what seems to have nothing to do with money often is – it may cost nothing to have faith but it can cost billions to administer a church.

I suppose I speak personally now, but it is built on the words of our members, to me one of the ways that send us into the delight of recovery is the ability to give and to contribute and to share, to join in together. This can be expressed by giving a hug and being hugged back, by cooking a meal for a friend or by painting a picture or walking to the shops with someone.

If services could give us the ability to be our own service in ways that weren't mutually exploitative we could achieve so much but we live in a world where we are the done to, the victims. We can need risk assessments when we decide to have children or mix in the wrong company.



We live in a world where despite legislation to the contrary 50% of people with a mental illness who are working do not disclose it to their employers.

We live in a world where exclusion and marginalisation are daily realities: at least 30% of prisoners have a mental illness and 50% of the homeless do too.

We live in a world where our workers believe devoutly in our social inclusion but in the name of professional boundaries sometimes cannot go as far as mixing with us socially.

We live in a world where 3% of people with a mental illness have been physically abused because of this and we live in a world where we feel guilt and shame about our conditions.

So when we look at what would transform our lives and one day mean we might spend fractionally less on mental health services we need to remember that it is hard to give and contribute, when people do not believe you can. It is hard to work when your colleagues shun you at work and the stress makes you ill. It is hard to make dinner for friends when 85% of people with a mental illness experience isolation as a daily reality and it is hard to laugh and smile and look positively around us when we have a life experience and an illness that reinforces our sense of inadequacy and beliefs about the poverty of our existence.

And yet we can do it, peer support and recovery, if sensitive, are one route, communal action is another, stopping stigma another, promoting diversity and tolerance another.

And of course helping society understand us and giving us a place that accepts our difference rather than making us normal when we cannot be is another solution.

I'll finish with some examples of dreams and realities that change things;

Every week hug members join in with a creative writing group in the local hospital, this is facilitated by occupational therapy. In this group; without effort, we share experiences, tea and coffee, we encourage each other, we make a link between those a long way down the recovery road and those for whom it is still a swearword. It is the embodiment of community and giving and laughter and the beginnings of hope.

My other example doesn't exist but is about not being caught in past prejudices. The number of people I meet who say they wished



they had lived when the old hospitals had farms and grounds and other forms of work is incredible. Some of us don't want to be conventional in our recovery. Some of us would be content with security and quietness and a place in nature to contribute in the way that we could but can't when living in the middle of a city.

When I was last in hospital visitors would come to see me and we developed a running joke or dream about a respite facility on the west coast where some people came for statutory respite, some people paid for a break. Where we cooked the food and ran outdoor activities. Where we facilitated creative expression and provided security for those who were vulnerable and where those that could received a wage and those that were not up to work did what they could voluntarily in return for accommodation and food and sanctuary.

And we said to ourselves that would never happen but on, reflection in hug, we have teachers and outdoor instructors, we have musicians and artists and writers, we have social workers and nurses and a vast array of people with talents and skills to give but lives and conditions that mean they cannot work in the fashion that our so called betters expect of us. So maybe it isn't impossible.

And maybe that is almost where I finish – if society could accept that we have so much to give but know we don't know how to get to work on time, know we can't budget, know we can't deal with the wrong sort of stress but yes we could flourish and give so much if some of that was catered for. Then we could stop being a burden and a cost and instead be an inspiration.

Lastly a plug for hug, I talked about shifting attitudes –it can be simple – many years ago the government funded us to commission a play on stigma – through help from comic relief we worked in partnership with Eden court theatre company to take it round the highland schools ultimately to around 5000 young people. The last evaluation of it showed that 97% of young people said that they would be more tolerant of people now that they had seen the play and briefings- doing this is both very complicated and very simple. crucial to it is the fact that it involves us and in that involvement is another solution.

Thank you.



ACTION FOR MENTAL HEALTH



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INVERNESS IN DEED