

Working in partnership to learn about strengths- based working

Concrete, March 2021 to Jan 2022



Homeless Link

Working in partnership to learn about strengths-based working with Concrete.

Learning partnership as part of the Strengths-based Practice Toolkit Project 2020-2022

What was the aim for Concrete?

To design a strengths-based system for measuring personal progress within Destination Home, part of Concrete and develop an internal Toolkit for applying it.

What steps were undertaken?

Concrete is a large service provider across North Staffordshire and East Cheshire, and is part of the Honeycomb Group. Destination Home is a contract delivered by Concrete in Stoke-on-Trent and is a partnership between Walk Ministries, Changes, Mind and Adullam. We deliver holistic support for vulnerable single people and couples including those with pets who are; homeless, insecurely housed or at risk of homelessness and require support to develop skills or sustain capacity to live independently through a range of prevention/tenancy sustainment, relief accommodation and recovery/move-on support, working with 340 people at any one time.

In addition to this we also deliver:

- Supported accommodation and homelessness prevention services for young persons.
- Specialist 24/7 housing for women experiencing multiple exclusion homelessness
- 'Navigate' thru-the-gate service coordination for people leaving prison
- Landlord liaison services, including private and social rented sector access.
- Peer mentoring
- Tenancy sustainment and move-on support.

The Partnership

Concrete submitted an Expression of Interest to the Strengths-based Practice Project to work in partnership on a number of areas of which the following were agreed:

- 1) Developing, along with our commissioners and partners, a framework that monitors the effectiveness of the SBP alongside distance travelled / progress made by customers.
- 2) Using the unique insight of those with lived experience to drive and shape the project.

An initial partnership meeting was held with Homeless Link, Concrete, Expert Link and Inspire Chilli in January 2021 with a second in early February. It was agreed that the project would look at how to create a person-led monitoring tool that would enable each person to define their own journey but would also work for commissioners. This had grown partly out of a mapping exercise which had seen people accessing services making significant progress that was not reflected in existing monitoring tools.

First steps towards this would include consultations with people who were accessing services or had in the past and information sessions with partners and staff. Later the project would work to design the resources and then to pilot them within specific areas of the project.

Discussion with partners and staff

In February 2021 a meeting was held between Concrete teams and partners at Changes, Adullam, Mind and Walk Ministries to outline the project and vision

In April 2021, partners identified staff champions and shared their current tools / best practice ideas via a dedicated MS Teams page

In May 2021 partners met to re-group and refocus and plan next stages

Consultation

In March 2021 Concrete embarked upon preparing the consultation including planning and designing a set of questions to be used during consultations

In May 2021 the Peer mentor and lived experience group met with project lead to discuss the current outcomes monitoring tool and some different alternatives. Feedback was collated. The peer mentors were then supported to hold further sessions held at each partner service.

In June 2021 Homeless Link visited one of Destination Home's services in Stoke with a view to taking part in resident consultations. A meeting was held with a peer mentor who discussed the topic. Unfortunately, only one person was available to take part in the consultation. Homeless Link participated in this conversation.

The consultation identified some challenges with the current system of outcomes monitoring that Concrete are looking to change such as it being time consuming and not person-led. Both Service Coordinators and Peer Mentors were clear that they valued open trusting relationships and would like any measurement to be focused around what was meaningful for that person. Their values were clearly in line with strengths-based working but their current tools were enabling this. This fitted with Concrete's aims for this project.

In Sep 2021 Homeless Link ran two workshops at Concrete. One was the team of Service Coordinators (navigators who support customers throughout their journey at Concrete) and the other for peer mentors including the Peer Mentor Coordinator. The workshops aimed both to share a greater understanding of strengths-based working and to facilitate discussion about existing and potential measurement tools.

Creation of tool and resources

In November 2021 a revised project team was set up with frequent meetings to:

- (1) Review feedback from the consultation sessions to date
- (2) Desktop analysis of sector wide toolkits to understand application and design in the context of SBP.
- (3) Design a pilot tool with consideration for a proposed Safety Planning Tool too
- (4) Project Team agreed 'look and feel' of tool with an outline pilot plan. Forecasted 'mini launch' in April 22.

Note: In the course of development and project planning Concrete was undergoing a restructure. This meant that project management capacity was limited. From April Concrete will be embedding a new structure and we envisage practice-based development projects to be more impactful from Summer 22.

Between December 2021 and March 2022 Concrete rolled out internal outcome star training. It was felt that it would be useful in the interim to ensure that staff were appropriately trained in using the existing tool.

From April to June 2022 Concrete will be piloting of new strengths-based/safety planning tool.

Was anyone else involved? E.g. partner agencies

The four partners involved within Destination Home are Walk Ministries, Changes, Mind and Adullam.

Walk Ministries are a faith-based and lived experience charity that work with adult males whose lives have been affected by addiction and offending. Walk work within our partnership and place people on voluntary work placements at Concrete. This brings a high level of authenticity to our service offer and highlights our commitment to be an organisation that puts people with a lived experience at the heart of everything that we do.

Changes are an organisation who offer support to people in the city who struggle with their mental health and wellbeing. This is done through wellbeing services, recovery options and weekly peer support groups as well as courses around mental health and wellbeing as well as meaningful use of time. Changes support our partnership by working with our customers to support them with their mental health and wellbeing as well as meaningful use of time.

Mind fit within the partnership in various ways, we work with Mind housing team to support suitable move ons between services in the partnerships to ensure people are living in the most suitable accommodation. Mind also offer the option of floating support that is specific to those with mental health concerns.

Adullam are a charity and organisation that offers hostel and move on accommodation within Stoke-on-Trent, along with other provisions country wide. They offer rooms within a staffed premises which holds 64 residents and then offer external accommodation which supports the move on for the right customers who are ready for that. As part of the partnership many customers go to the hostel first, we then look for suitable move on opportunities outside of Adullam services and within the partnership.

What have the outcomes been?

Despite the many changes occurring at Concrete throughout the development of the tool, including being one of the lead organisations for Stoke-on-Trent during the pandemic's 'everyone in' initiative, it was possible to derive learning and immediate practice-based outcomes:

Consultation and reflection

Staff and peer mentors were given the space to critically appraise existing practice tools. For example, following feedback regarding the Outcome Star, staff highlighted that the scoring system was inherently deficit based and didn't capture progress as well as it could, nor did it encourage celebration of the 'little miracles' which occur along the way. This was particularly significant for people with long histories of homelessness and/or tenancy breakdowns where relatively short stays in accommodation represent a significant achievement but wouldn't necessarily be scored as progress by an objective scoring system.

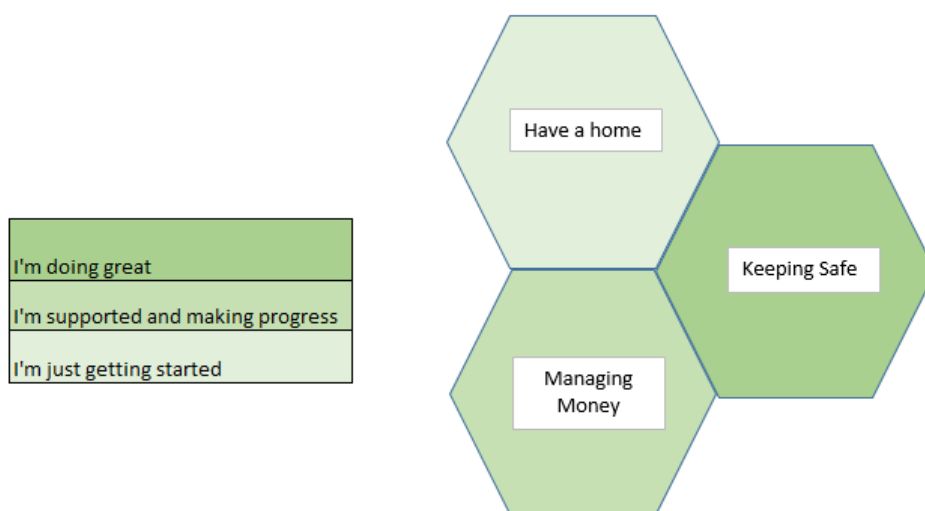
Another key issue that was raised was the timing of outcomes assessments. Undertaking any form of assessment when first moving into accommodation could be counter-productive as people are not ready to be engaged with the process meaningfully at that point.

These sorts of discussions and critical thinking from staff and customers who interact with existing tools is invaluable. A key outcome is that this has enabled Concrete to understand what's important and meaningful to staff and customers, so that we can review what we use and make improvements to how we apply practice based tools whilst being mindful on the language we use.

Developing the tool

The Leadership Team had a half day session where we tried to bring together the results of the consultation feedback to attempt to design a tool. We quickly stopped trying to factor in "how to measure" distance travelled, instead focussing on the tool and techniques to be used with customers (having faith that whatever this looked like the data team could work out how to measure it at a later date). It was most important from the feedback that we moved away from numerical scales or any sort of enforced scoring and that the tool recognises that each persons' goals are different. The discussion was around having a tool that allows each person to select which areas they might work on immediately (2 – 4 areas) and then they can select and add in more areas as they progress (linking this to Maslow - basic needs first).

We ended up with a concept where a customer would pick an area to work on (from a pre-determined list – e.g. Have a Home; Keeping Safe; Managing Money etc) and in that area they would set their goal, with a small number of actions to complete to get there and it would be this goal, and the small interim steps, that would form the first "Hexagon". Visually, customers would see a picture, made up of however many hexagons they had chosen, stacking together (imagine a honeycomb). Each hexagon would be an area they had decided to work on, and each hexagon would then change density of colour as the customer made positive progress towards their own goal. The hexagon would then be complete when they had reached that goal. An example of what it could look like is below.



We envisaged each area having a working guide for staff containing strengths-based questions to consider to support the customer in their goal and action setting for each area.

From a measurement perspective, we later agreed that the information could be put into an excel work book that could then attribute a score (invisible to customers) for each sub goal / goal to be able to measure distance travelled. After the pilot stages and inevitable changes that would come with this we would then look to have this built into our CRM.

Key areas of learning

Staff and Leadership Turnover

During the course of the partnership, Concrete experienced changes in leadership and staff turnover. Subsequently the organisation underwent internal changes which further delayed the project. Nominating a project lead with consistent project management is key on a project such as this as there is considerable momentum required to drive a project forwards. It is also essential to recognise that it takes staff capacity to dedicate time to a project involving change to the organisation.

Upon reflection the initiation of the project began when key staff members left the business and significant pressures on service delivery during the 'Everyone in' campaign.

Concrete is entering into a new phase with a more simplified structure and services aligned to its primary goal of making homelessness history. As such, there will be more capacity to take on projects which support and contribute to the development of best practice.

Process is as important as the final product

In a strengths-based project the process of how things the system is designed is hugely important. Establishing a clear consensus on strengths-based working within the specific context of the organisation is key. The consultation process will be specific to each organisation but needs to be carefully designed with involvement of all stakeholders. Co-production is an important principle as is giving staff time to reflect on their current practice and future work. All these things need to be in place before the detail of designing an outcomes monitoring tool can be started.

Consultation with experts by experience

There was significant learning from undertaking the consultation process. The consultation with peer mentors was hugely successful. It not only led to interesting discussions and feedback but the peer mentors themselves gained a great deal from the process. The group felt valued and appreciated being listened to. This helped to build their confidence and cement them as a group.

The customer consultation proved more challenging. The timing of the planned meetings unfortunately coincided with greater Covid restrictions which made it impossible to undertake the group consultation events that were planned. Whilst it was possible to engage with some customers one-to-one, it wasn't as easy to establish the purpose of the consultation. This would have worked better as a workshop or larger event.

In one-to-one meetings it proved more difficult to get specific feedback. Some customers were unclear what they were being asked about and why. This in itself was an interesting finding and reflected the fact that some customers are not fully engaged with the existing outcomes tool and had a low level of awareness of having taken it. However, it also demonstrated the importance of establishing context when delivering a consultation. Unless people understand the reasons for the consultation and the broader context, it is difficult to elicit meaningful responses.

The key learning from this is that group workshop sessions were far more successful than one-to-one discussions. They allowed the creation of a positive learning environment in which attendees can share ideas and start to think about a topic in more detail. There is also opportunity to deliver presentations or films to promote discussions. This then enables people to participate in a meaningful way.

Scale of the project

Another key area of learning has been the scale of introducing new outcomes monitoring. After beginning the consultation it became clear that this would impact on a large number of other areas such as policies and procedures, risk assessments and data management. This meant that the level of work required to implement a new monitoring across the organisation was larger than initially realised and that there was a requirement for staff capacity across different departments. It is important to recognise this at the outset and ensure there is capacity in all relevant parts of the organisation.

It was originally intended to trial and embed the new outcome monitoring within one small part of the service. As time progressed, it was felt to be important to ensure that it fitted with all other parts of the project and the ambition grew. However, this made the system harder to design and the consultation process broader. Key learning here would be to trial this in a small way and then afterwards look to scale it up and expand.

Staff Training

There has been a considerable shift in the recruitment market for people seeking to work in the homelessness sector. More and more we are recruiting people with little/no experience from other sectors. This presents an opportunity to 'restart' and shape thinking from the 'get go' for new starters looking to support people who experience homelessness and multiple disadvantage. For example, staff induction with learning modules linked to language, assessments and support planning – making these more asset and strengths based. This will also need to include reflective practice where we 'step back' and think, for example, about how unconscious biases about aspirations can place disproportionate pressure for people to 'be more' or inadvertently people feeling they are 'not good enough'.

For existing staff there is an opportunity to deliver training to ensure that they are using our existing tools in the most strengths-based possible way. As such the organisation has committed to delivering staff training in the interim before the new tool is delivered.

Final thoughts

Concrete seeks to engage in the development of practice and policy when opportunities arise. We have established good connections with local and national universities and regularly contribute to research projects and policy initiatives. The opportunity to contribute to the development of strengths-based practice was very welcome and we would like to thank Homeless Link for the opportunity. We will continue to feed back our progress in this area to Homeless Link.

What We Do

Homeless Link is the national membership charity for frontline homelessness services. We work to improve services through research, guidance and learning, and campaign for policy change that will ensure everyone has a place to call home and the support they need to keep it.

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