

# Against the current

Changing your life is hard – and brain-numbing supported housing plans don't make it easier. **Gerard Lemos** and **Francis Bacon** suggest a new approach



Helping people who need housing-related support is a no-brainer. But sometimes a no-brainer can become brain numbing.

Since Supporting People was introduced in 2003, people receiving housing-related support should have an agreed plan to facilitate it. That's good in theory. Everyone should know what goals the service user is working towards and what help they need from support workers to achieve them.

But there are problems. Many support plans are dull and mechanistic. They tend to say the same things: sort out the housing benefit, get on a training course, find move-on accommodation. The goals are just not that interesting. In fact, they're downright boring.

As a result, many keyworking sessions – supposedly to discuss support plans and goals – are sterile and pointless, endlessly revisiting long-standing goals and noting depressingly little progress. It's hardly a dynamic way to meet personal aspirations.

But there's an even worse problem. Many people living in temporary supported housing aren't interested in the main goals in their plan, even if they did sign it. Housing and employment training are not their top priorities.

They want to get their life back together, move beyond the current crisis. They want to break away from isolation and a chaotic lifestyle and kick some bad habits. They want to get in touch with family and old friends after a period of being out of touch – sometimes for as long as several years.

They want to find some new interests, meet new people, have some fun. And, most important of all, they want what pretty well everybody else wants – to fall in love and live happily ever after. Some have already fallen in love, but can't live happily ever after because they haven't got anywhere to live.

So the written support plan is a fiction. It represents what officialdom wants. People's real aspirations may not even have been mentioned to support workers, so staff do nothing to help them achieve their true goals.

The challenge that Thames Reach, a large London-based homelessness charity, set social researchers Lemos & Crane was to work with service users to define a new approach to support planning. Users would not only be able to decide what their goals were, but also when and how they worked

on their support plan, and whether or not a support worker would be present. The idea is to shift the balance of power away from staff.

Three service users – Darren Augustin, Adrian Hillary and Meshach Mills – became peer researchers, funded by grant-provider City Bridge Trust. With their help the Blue Salmon website was created. The website is confidential and password-protected. Entries can only be viewed with the user's permission.

The site has two parts. The first is a series of questions covering 'personal identity', 'loving and lasting one-to-one relationships' and 'family and friends'. Users work through these at their own pace, any time and any where they have access to the internet. They can be alone, with a friend or with a support worker; pausing, saving and continuing whenever they want.

The software analyses their answers and suggests action points tailored to them. So, for instance, someone who enjoyed playing football as a child would be asked whether they want to take it up again. Or, if you note that you were close to your grandmother but don't see her frequently, Blue Salmon will suggest a visit. The action points selected from suggestions by users are automatically added to their action plan.

This is the second part of the site. The action plan is a set of floating connected circles. Each circle describes one action point. Further action points can be added, and when one has been completed, the achievement can be recorded. Each step required to fulfil each action point (as well as the support that others may need to give along the way) can also be noted. It's personal, fun and simple to use. The whole thing can be printed out or emailed, for example to family and friends.

Using an innovative research method, the three peer researchers showed prototypes of the site to more than 80 of Thames Reach's service users. Staff were concerned beforehand. Would users feel comfortable using computers and the internet? What about people with literacy problems? Some support workers worried that they would be done out of a job.

Most of these fears proved unfounded. In fact, most service users were quite comfortable with computers and the internet, indeed more comfortable with IT than some of the support workers. People with literacy difficulties could easily work

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through the site with the help of a peer advisor or mentor. And support workers found helping service users meet the more personal goals they were setting more interesting than the usual, run-of-the-mill stuff.

One Thames Reach service user comments that using Blue Salmon 'gave me insight'. Another that it 'changed [my] thinking. I found it very enriching'. A third says Blue Salmon 'helped me to reach inside', while another finds it 'a nice change to other types of project'. The consensus is that it brings service users and staff closer together.

Their comments vindicate the decision to do something new and different with support planning.

Blue Salmon is a way of saying welcome to normal life. And why is it called Blue Salmon? Because blue salmon swim upstream. Life feels like that some times, particularly for homeless or vulnerable people.

● **Gerard Lemos and Francis Bacon work for social researchers Lemos & Crane**  
● **Visit [www.bluesalmon.org.uk](http://www.bluesalmon.org.uk) to apply for a free guided inspection**

## Heading upstream

### Mary's story

Mary is an elderly woman with a learning disability who entered supported housing following an abusive relationship. Blue Salmon allowed her to talk about her past in more detail than ever before. She identified raising her three children as her proudest achievement. Although it wasn't always easy, there were moments she particularly enjoyed. For instance she used to have baking days when she would bake for the whole family and everyone would enjoy her cooking. But when her children left home she no longer had a reason to cook for others and hadn't done so since. Now her support worker has added baking to her support plan. She regularly makes cakes for the staff and other clients and, according to those who know her, this has done wonders for her self-esteem.

### John's story

John was on a homelessness scheme for young people in Tyneside. In a support session using the 'relationships' questions, John was encouraged enough to tell his support worker he is gay – something he hadn't divulged to anyone at the project until then. He explained how he had left home because his family hadn't accepted his sexuality and had become violent towards him. His support worker helped him sign up to group sessions at a young gay and bisexual men's community support service in Newcastle. Now he is keener than ever to move out of the hostel and find a place of his own in the city centre.