

Public Perceptions Strategy discussion paper

Purpose

This paper sets out the current progress to develop a public perceptions strategy and the ongoing work to deliver change. HPSG members are invited to review and comment in general, and in particular consider whether they will formally approve the draft aims and outcomes. Members have already committed to engaging with this agenda and taking it forward in their own organisations and networks – it would be useful to consider what specific actions this might involve.

Activity to date

We have convened a group of communications specialists from across the homelessness sector to develop our approach to changing public perceptions. Currently, it has representation from Shelter, Homeless Action Scotland, Street Soccer, Simon Community Scotland, Social Bite, The Homelessness Network, Crisis, and Aberdeen Cyrenians. David Duke and Gavin Yates are both members, representing a direct link between HPSG and discussions around public perceptions.

Following its most recent meeting on 24 April, the group has developed and agreed a shared understanding that, while organisations have their own communication priorities, there are benefits to having a shared strategy aimed at addressing stigma. This will allow organisations to take forward their own activities while knowing they are contributing to a national project. The development of such a strategy is being progressed collaboratively, and additional contributors are actively sought.

Aims

The basis of the strategy is its aims. The below have been developed by the group and HPSG are invited to discuss and comment.

OBJECTIVE: TO CHANGE THE CONVERSATION AROUND HOMELESSNESS	
Aims	Outcomes
<i>People at risk of/experiencing homelessness know their rights to housing and support and which services to approach for help.</i>	<i>People at risk of/experiencing homelessness are empowered to seek support in a way which facilitates their choice and control over the level and type of support provided.</i>
<i>People recognise that while homelessness is a problem, people who are homeless are not a problem.</i>	<i>People at risk of or experiencing homelessness don't feel stigmatised or embarrassed and know that they have a right to seek help from services.</i>
<i>People know that homelessness is the result of inequality, poverty and systems, not individual fault or failing.</i>	<i>People empathise when they think someone is at risk of homelessness and do not judge individuals.</i>

OBJECTIVE: TO CHANGE THE CONVERSATION AROUND HOMELESSNESS	
Aims	Outcomes
<i>People believe that there homelessness is not inevitable or acceptable and that there are always collective solutions to homelessness.</i>	<p><i>People working in public services recognise when someone is at risk of homelessness and are empowered to signpost and support them towards relevant services</i></p> <p><i>People at risk of/experiencing homelessness are supported, connected to their communities and treated with dignity and respect.</i></p>

It would be helpful for HPSG members to consider and comment on these aims, and to commit to furthering them throughout the work of their organisations as we go forward.

Concrete Action

The aims form the basis of the strategy, and much can be achieved if organisations proactively adopt these and take them forward within their own comms. The public perceptions working group is seeking to provide some definite, concrete activity under these ambitions, to aid us in taking collective action towards altering the public discourse.

Style Guide: A 'style guide' is being developed by comms professionals on the working group. It is initially for the sector but with the ambition that a version will be produced that we can ask media outlets to adopt. This will explain the impact of the language we are seeking to change and suggest easy to use alternatives, explaining how and why they are better. We anticipate that the act of implementing a style guide will provide an opportunity to articulate the effect of stigma and get wide buy in from content producers on how they can be part of a change.

The guide is drawing on material from the Frameworks research and similar resources produced by Shelter, and the content will be worked through with people with lived experience through organisations' networks.

A draft style guide may be available to be shared before 11 June. Members will be asked to consider how to embed this document in their organisation, and therefore whether there are particular formats or elements which should be included.

Media event in the run up to Christmas: We know there will be a rise in interest in homelessness in the run up to Christmas, which means we have a window before that to influence content producers. We hope to develop the media focused style guide ahead of the winter, and hold a media briefing event perhaps with people with lived experience with the aim of encouraging a more useful angle. This could dovetail with emerging plans to coordinate campaigns from frontline outreach organisations around rough sleeping, representing an opportunity to steer two predictable annual phenomena in a more positive direction. This idea needs more consideration, and would need buy in from all members of HPSG to be workable.

Audience segmentation and message mapping: the same message and channel will not resonate effectively with disparate groups of people across Scotland. A number of key audience segments have been identified previously, including but not limited to frontline workers in health, the police, policy makers across the Scottish Government, housing service providers, the general public, etc. The group is therefore meeting on 17 June to hold a mapping session to identify key groups, consider what messages they need to hear, and decide who to target first and how.

Broadening the collaborative: Currently, the group is third sector focused and needs representation from local authorities and housing providers in particular. We intend to approach the following organisations for discussions on how they can take an effective part in strategy development, and what they can offer in terms of tools and activities to further the aims:

- COSLA
- ALACHO
- Housing Options Hubs
- SFHA
- GWSF
- CIH

This list is intended to fill the most obvious gaps in engagement, though other organisations interested in being part of the collaborative effort will be welcome.

Lived experience voice: The group agreed to hold a session for all involved in taking forward public perception activity with people with lived experience to help identify and articulate the impact of stigma. Such a session would provide material to help explain more generally how stigma affects people experiencing homelessness, and begin the process of developing alternative messaging. Being able to demonstrate the effect of stigmatising language on real people is a key element in explaining to content producers why they need to make a change.

Group members agreed to consider how this could be done, taking advantage of sessions members already run with their service users, e.g. Street Soccer training sessions.

A formal marketing campaign: The Scottish Government runs an internal process to consider marketing campaigns on an organisation wide basis. This takes place in the autumn, for activity in 2020-21. Officials are in discussion with the Marketing Unit to understand how to engage with this process.

Measuring change

We will need to assess the degree to which this activity affects people's views across Scotland. It is unlikely to be straightforward to do this and change will be difficult to measure. The group agreed that the Street Soccer 2017 research into public perceptions of homelessness presented a strong and relevant baseline from which to start this work. There are a number of other opportunities to broaden the baseline, including the upcoming project to evaluate the Frameworks research and lighter touch street questionnaire surveys being planned by Social Bite.