EXPERTS BY EXPERIENCE DEVELOPING HOMELESS SERVICES

The Own keys -project

Maria Murto
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Diaconia University of Applied Sciences
Diak Helsinki
Degree Programme in Social Services
Bachelor of Social Services (UAS)

ABSTRACT

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The aim of this study was to evaluate Own keys –project and identify its successful characteristics as well as challenges that occurred during the project. Based on this information the aim was also to present possible solutions to those challenges. Hopefully this thesis will then provide ideas on how to conduct a similar project in the future.

Qualitative research methods were used to execute this study.
Three experts by experience who worked in Own keys –project were interviewed individually. Thematic, half-structured interviews were used because it highlights the interviewees' own interpretations and feelings more openly. The contents of interviews were analyzed thematically.

The findings of this study indicate that the main challenges were lack of resources, particularly lack of time which is essential for creating a trustful relationship with the service users and professional workers. Another main challenge was the fixed attitudes of professionals and their initial reluctance to move towards empowering ways of work.

The research findings also indicate that a positive change in attitudes is now initiated and co-operation between different actors is strengthened.

Key words: expert by experience, empowerment, homelessness, participation

CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1 Motivation

During the first year of studies I realized that I will definitely do one placement at No Fixed Abode NGO (Vailla vakinaista asuntoa ry). It was very clear for me from the beginning of my placement in No Fixed Abode NGO fall 2012 that I wish to do my thesis there. For seven weeks I observed the environment and considered the topic and the area of my interest. The involvement of service users in developing services is becoming increasingly common. At No Fixed Abode participation is in the core of its working culture.

The experts by experience are in a vital role in the organization which is quite logical as the organization was originally founded by group of homeless men themselves. In the organization there is quite a strong spirit of "Nothing about us without us". In my thesis I wish to reinforce this trend and strengthen the voice of people which in my case means people who have experienced homelessness. After all, it is always the people who know the best about their own lives.

The topic was defined together with Carole Brady, the area coordinator who is responsible of Own keys –project (Omat avaimet –hanke), in January 2013. The topic was negotiated in such a manner that it answers the needs of the organization as well as my area of interest. My thesis is related to Own keys – project in which three experts by experience develop services in four cities in Finland: Lahti, Kuopio, Jyväskylä and Tampere. These experts by experience collected the views and experiences from local people who are or have been homeless and the information will be used when developing services. The idea was to empower people and enable them to participate in decision-making and planning from the very beginning. The project was active from 2012 to 2015 which means that my thesis is current and there is a demand for it. The Own keys –project is further explained in the chapter of research environment.

1.2 Developing the research theme

The goal for my study was to find out if the aims of their project are reached – can experts by experience have an influence in decision-making and planning of services? However, I struggled to find a way how to conduct the study so that I would find the answers. Should I choose one of the project cities and interview the local experts by experience as well as the official parties? In that case, it would demand enormously time and resources to actually visit and spend time in one of the project cities. Furthermore, the nature of the project was complex, because the theme of the project was to renovate or build different supporting services for people who are suffering from homelessness. Again, in such projects, it will require time before concrete results are visible and can be studied.

Finding the focus for my thesis has been a long process which included also one year off from studies. Fall 2016 I had a meeting with the project coordinator, Carole Brady. During this time the project had already finished, which made it easier to find the precise focus for the thesis. Furthermore, I was assured that the topic of this thesis was still current. In consensus we decided that I will only interview those experts by experience who were hired as project workers by No Fixed Abode NGO. As a result, the focus naturally sifted on finding out project workers' own interpretations and experiences about the project and how they view the project – what would they name as success and challenges, would they do something differently in future and how would they develop the model of Own keys -project. Were they heard in decision-making, what kind of changes in attitudes, for example, occurred? This suited me well as I did not want them to be merely the subjects of my study but my aspiration is to cherish the spirit of No fixed abode NGO: "Nothing about us without us". In other words, I wanted to strengthen the voice of those who have knowledge but whose knowledge is often seen secondary to academic knowledge. This theme is further explained in the chapter of theoretical framework and key concepts.

2 RESEARCH QUESTION

As the focus of this thesis became clearer, two main questions rose: How did the Own Keys –project succeed? With this question in mind I aim to pinpoint the successful parts of the project as well as the challenges. In other words, I will evaluate the project and whether it has succeeded in reaching its goals. Based on this information the second research question arises: What should be done in the future when executing similar project? That is, what elements were functional and worth taking into consideration in the future and what should be done differently in order to tackle the possible challenges that hindered Own Keys –project.

2.1 Purpose of the study

The Own keys –project is first of a kind and throughout the project it is evaluated and a model is made which enables a similar project to take place in a different context. This thesis is a part of larger unity of evaluating the processes and outcomes of Own keys –project. Instead of just plainly evaluate the project I also aim to identify possible challenges that occurred during the project and to find solutions to those challenges. These findings will hopefully provide tools for developing similar projects in future. Furthermore, I have agreed to present my findings to those who have worked in Own keys –project after the thesis process is completed and also write a summary of these findings for Asukki-magazine. In addition, it is possible that this thesis will be presented in Feantsa, which is an umbrella organization for not-for-profit organizations working with homelessness in Europe.

It has also been stated that there is an increasing trend in which universities of applied sciences have an active role and a clear mission in developing local social- and health services in such manner that citizens and service users are participated in decision-making and developing the services. Clients are not

seen only as clients but active citizens with rights and freedom of choices. (Hyväri 2014, 187-188.) I wish to see this thesis as a part of this trend of participatory development and as my contribution in strengthening the voice of service users.

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND KEY CONCEPTS

3.1 The ATLAS Project

In Vanha Viertotie housing unit a participatory development project ATLAS has been conducted, which has similarities to Own keys –project. One aim of the ATLAS project was to develop in cooperation with professionals and service users a housing unit which takes into consideration the needs and expectations of service users. The service users were involved in decision-making and planning of services from the very beginning. In addition, aim was to support service users and professionals to act and develop services together. The peer support and experienced based expertise of service users was strengthened as well as the professionalism and exploratory working habits of professionals. (Vogt & Koski 2015, 181 – 182.)

3.2 Empowering ways of working

FEANTSA, The European Federation of National Organizations Working with the Homeless is an umbrella organization for not-for-profit organizations which work with homelessness in Europe. As a part of its Participation Toolkit it has published a document which collected testimonies from different European countries and how they perceive working in an empowering way with homeless. This document has provided a parallel for this thesis as it provides information from similar projects and challenges that can occur. (Empowering ways of working 2009.)

3.3 Alternative way of perceiving knowledge

Traditionally it is thought that to gain and produce knowledge one has to be unbiased, objective and distant from the subject of research. This means that the researcher should not have direct contact to the studied subject and thereby

promote interest of certain group of people; the researcher should not let emotions or opinions interfere the study and the subject should not influence the researcher. From this follows that the knowledge of people who have personal experience from, for example, oppression and exclusion, is less trustworthy and qualified. This mindset leads to more oppression and exclusion. Knowledge is power and therefore not all knowledge is equal. To gain knowledge can empower people but the knowledge of those who have the least amount of power is less valued. This situation is maintained by power structures of the society, and the society's values are what dictate what is considered as knowledge. (Beresford & Salo 2008, 17, 24 – 28.)

Peter Beresford (2008) has developed a theory which challenges this traditional way of comprehending knowledge and turns these established values of research contrariwise:

The greater the distance between direct experience and knowledge is the greater is probability of the knowledge being inaccurate, unreliable and biased.

Beresford does not claim that the theory he presented is more accurate than the traditional way of gaining knowledge – rather it offers a ground for comprehending knowledge from a wider, different perspective. The aim of this theory is to support empowerment of people by acknowledging and valuing their experiences. Underestimating the knowledge of people who have experienced oppression and exclusion cannot be equitable or beneficial because that knowledge can include positive values and remarks that are lacking from traditional ways of gaining knowledge. (Beresford & Salo 2008, 17, 32 – 34.)

I found this theory very intriguing – it reveals the existing power imbalances of society and highlights the significance of people's own experiences for empowerment. This theory has guided me throughout the whole thesis process.

This theory also acts as a justification for my thesis – why I have chosen to execute it in a way I have. Obviously, as I am the researcher of this study, I

must execute it by following existing rules and frames of academic research. However, the focus of this study lays on the knowledge of experts by experience, and my role is merely present it to a wider public.

3.4 Homelessness

The key concepts of this study are homelessness and experts by experience. The Collins English Dictionary defines homelessness as

> The state of having nowhere to live; the problem of people having no home.

No Fixed Abode NGO further clarifies that homelessness is a circumstance, not an attribute of an individual person (Vailla vakinaista asuntoa ry 2012).

3.5 Empowerment

Empowerment can be explained as a process in which people – both in individual and group level – increase their ability to be informed, make choices and convert those choices into actions and outcomes. Empowerment is an opposite of approach in which people are viewed as receivers of charity or as targets of social work. Empowerment is also linked to question of power – what are the power imbalances in existing society and how to redistribute power more equally. In a group level, empowerment increases the capacity of people who share similar circumstances or have similar interests to access resources and to even make social and political changes in society. (Empowering ways of working 2009, 3 – 4.)

3.6 Participation

Participation is linked to empowerment as one of its elements. Referring to homelessness participation can be described as

the effective involvement of people experiencing homelessness in service provision as well as in decision making processes affecting these services. Participation is a good way for people to develop their skills and self-confidence. It allows people to make new experiences and engage with other people in something meaningful.

It is further clarified that without an opportunity to participate empowerment will be impossible. Yet it is important to keep in mind that participation is always voluntary and people have the right not be involved. (Empowering ways of working 2009, 4.)

3.7 Expert by experience

Expert by experience is more difficult term to define. It is not a settled term and it matches hardly any results not to mention definitions. Another term could be user involvement which appears more frequently in literature. However, in my opinion, these two do not carry the same meaning and therefore I prefer to use the term experts by experience in this research. In addition, that term is also used by No Fixed Abode NGO in brochures translated in English. Therefore, I find it logical for me to use the same term.

Nieminen (2014) defines that expert by experience refers to a person who possesses certain information and expertise based on his/her life circumstances. They can be trained as experts by experience who can disclose their own experiences as well as their reference group's experiences. (Nieminen 2014, 15, 20.) Thus, in this case expert by experience refers to a person who has experienced homelessness with the difference that they have not received training.

4 RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT

4.1 No Fixed Abode NGO

No Fixed Abode NGO is an organization founded by homeless themselves year 1986. It is politically and religiously independent non-governmental organization which has defined its main aims as enhancing conditions for those living in shelters and ensuring the opportunity of independent housing for everyone by creating social impact. (Vailla vakinaista asuntoa ry, n.d.)

The first seven years of the activity of the organization was run by volunteers. Even though professionals of health and social sector are now working together with people who have experienced homelessness, the activity of the organization has always based on the activity of homeless people to enhance their wellbeing. Therefore No Fixed Abode NGO has a long tradition of participation, and year 2011-2012 a strategy for participation was documented. (Vuosikirja 2012, 5.)

The principle idea of No Fixed Abode NGO is that everybody is capable of living independently when provided with adequate circumstances and support. The lack of housing is unacceptable under whichever circumstance as housing is both a human right and a fundamental right. (Vailla vakinaista asuntoa ry, n.d.)

4.2 Own keys – project

Brady, Maunula and Petrovskaja (2015) describe the Own keys –project as an innovative development project coordinated by No Fixed Abode NGO during the years of 2012-2015. The project is planned to complement and support PAAVO 2 program, which aims to reduce and eradicate long-term homelessness. Own keys –project is funded by Finland's Slot Machine Association.

The aim of the project is to strengthen the participation of those, who have experienced homelessness, in decision-making of different services from the early planning stage to the execution of the services. The project is implemented in cooperation with Lahti, Kuopio, Tampere and Jyväskylä.

The principle idea of the Own keys –project is that those experts by experience hired by No Fixed Abode NGO gather grass-root-information from local people who have experienced homelessness. Together with local people they then participate in planning of services. Experts by experience have an active role working as a bridge between local service users and officials. The aim is to support active citizenship and thus create services that better fit the needs of service users. Another goal is to change attitudes in general and to establish this model of work as a sustainable working method. By strengthening the networks of local service users and lowering the threshold between them and the service producers, Own keys –project aims to enforce cooperation and participation between these two parties. (Brady, Maunula & Petrovskaja 2015, 1 – 3.)

4.3 The project process

At the beginning of the interviews I asked the interviewees what their role in the project was and what kind of aims and expectations they had when they first started in the Own keys –project. All of them replied that they did not have any expectations at all; they felt that they started the project blind-folded. All of them were aware of the mission of the project – to gather a group of local service users and to motivate them to participate in decision-making concerning the services they use as well as motivate the professionals to work in an empowering and participatory way with the service users. But their vision of their own role was vague.

The experts by experience started their work by meeting the local service users and laying the ground for establishing a trustful relationship with them. Creating

trust is a time consuming process and the approach has to be very gentle. Recreational activities were arranged in order to familiarize people with each other. Maintaining trustful relationship was one of the key elements of the project as trust is essential when motivating people to participate in decision-making and developing the services.

At the same time, trustful relationships were also created with local professionals and service providers. The development needs and targets of each city were mapped. The views of service users and experts by experience were implemented in decision-making and development process so that genuine participation is possible. In this way, service users were able to have an effect on very concrete solutions concerning the interior of housing units and what kind of equipment is necessary in the kitchen, for example.

At first, all of the interviewees felt that they were acting as a bridge between the local service users and the service providers, because there was no true connection between these two parties in the existing working culture. However, the aim was to change attitudes and establish a culture in which the voice and participation of service users is a natural aspect of daily work and would remain as such even after the Own keys –project is over and the experts by experience have left the cities.

5 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This thesis is accomplished by using qualitative research methods. The starting point for qualitative research is a holistic approach to the subject that is being researched. The aspiration is to find or reveal existing facts around specific theme rather than testing researcher's hypotheses. Methods, which allow the interviewee's own expressions and interpretations emerge, are preferred. Thus, the researcher is not the one who decides what is important and what is not. Other characteristic for qualitative research is that the interviewees are appropriately selected (versus selecting the target group randomly). Also, in qualitative research the researcher is interested in reoccurring themes. (Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara 2008. 156 – 162.)

As a research methodology I have chosen thematic, half-structured interview. This method highlights the interviewees own definitions and feelings. Instead of detailed pre-determined questions thematic interview proceeds on fundamental themes which allows the interviewees to express their own interpretations and feelings more openly. There are certain preconditions that must be fulfilled in order to execute thematic interview: First, it is known that all the interviewees have experienced certain situation. Secondly, the researcher is aware of the processes, structures and entirety of this specific situation or phenomenon. Based on this information the researcher can then construct a presumption around which the themes and structure of the interview is developed. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2000, 47-48.)

The structure of the interview was designed fall 2016 (Appendix 1 and 2). Chronological order was used as it seemed the most natural way to carry out the interview and to find the needed results. First theme concentrated on the beginning of the Own keys –project. In what way did the interviewee perceive his/her role within the project and what kind of expectations and objectives he/she had? Second theme was about evaluating the project – how well did the project reach its goals, were there any challenges and what was successful.

These first two themes served as a foundation for the third theme and were often referred to later on during the interview. The third theme concentrated on developing needs of the project as well as identifying tools and methods that could be used in similar projects in future. In addition, at the end of each interview I gave an opportunity for the interviewee to bring forth other themes or issues he/she wanted to address that I might have failed to inquire.

The interview questions with a covering note in which I introduced myself and the purpose of the study, as well as ensuring of anonymity and confidentiality of the interviewees' was send to the project coordinator Carole Brady, who then forwarded it to interviewees. The interviews were conducted during spring 2016 at No Fixed Abode NGO's office. The duration of interviews varied between 40 to 60 minutes. Each interview was transcribed immediately after interview to avoid misunderstandings that could occur if there had been a large break between the interview and the transcribing. In total, there were 35 pages of transcribed material.

5.1 Ethical considerations

Throughout the thesis process the ethical considerations of research were considered. This includes voluntary participation to interviews, anonymity and confidentiality.

The research findings are represented by grouping the information from different interviews. Direct quotes are avoided, because the group of interviewees is small and quotations would be too easy to identify. In addition, the fact that I have translated the results in English also helps to diminish the interviewees' personalities thus ensuring that no one can be recognized from the text. Same principles of anonymity and confidentiality are followed in the translated summary to Finnish language, which is presented to No Fixed Abode NGO.

5.2 Validity of the study

Validity means the chosen research method's ability to describe and measure what it is supposed to measure. In qualitative research the validity of the study is increased by accurate description of the research process. (Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara 2008. 226 – 228.)

In this thesis the research process (including research environment and conduction of interviews) has been described as accurately as possible. The research findings are represented as such, which means that no results are concealed nor have I emphasized specific findings gratuitously. Furthermore, the results found from the interviews are compared to other studies from the same field. Based on these other studies I might have had preconceptions of, for example, what could be named as the challenges of Own keys –project. However, I was careful not to guide the conversation to a direction of my choice and only those results that the interviewees mentioned are represented here.

5.3 Analysing the data collected

During the interviewees I noticed that the interviewees had a wider understanding for the terms expert by experience and expertise by experience than what was my initial perception. In their usage the term referred both to themselves and to the local service users who suffer or have suffered from homelessness. This indicates just how unsettled term expert by experience is and at No Fixed Abode NGO the term is perhaps even wider than in other organizations or in relevant literature. However, to make the text more comprehensible and consistent, I have decided to use the term expert by experience when I refer only to those who have been paid workers in Own keys –project and who I have interviewed. With the term service user I refer to local people who have also experienced homelessness. If I refer to both groups it is mentioned separately. Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that such

strict distinction did not occur in real life and the distinction in this thesis is solely for the purpose of making the text more understandable.

6 FINDINGS

6.1 Challenges

One of the basic challenges is that resources are often scarce. Lack of time and money are very practical concerns and can be preventing from doing as much as wanted even if motivation to do things is strong.

6.1.1 Time and trust

All of the interviewees felt that there was not enough time. It requires time to create a trustful relationship with the local service users; even a year or more. The distance to the target cities made it difficult to create trust – the expert by experience appears for the first time, introduces him/herself – and then disappears for a month. Any relationship in life requires time and maintenance and to create trustful relationship with a person who has experienced homelessness and oppression one has to have particularly gentle approach. One has to be present all the time and remind the person that you still exist and you are interested of his/hers opinions. Because as long as there is no trust there is no motivation to express one's opinions not to mention to get involved in a development project.

On the other hand, the experts by experience had to create a trustful relationship with the professionals as well. They had to assure the workers that they did not come from the Great City of Helsinki to turn their work upside down or that the experts by experience were some sort of resistance movement loudly demanding more rights.

Sharing one's life story is directly linked in creation of trustful relationship. All of the interviewees felt that it was necessary to share their own story, their own background in order to gain people's trust. The service users are keen to know what kind of similarities they have in their experiences and on what basis can someone be expert by experience thus advocating for them.

The professionals are keen to hear the same things but they also want to know what kind of skills expert by experience has and what makes expert by experience any different from the other service users. In other words, what kind of competences expert by experience has and how can they trust that the experience is not subjective but applies to the reference group as well.

6.1.2 The fixed attitudes of professionals

Previous studies have mentioned that existing structures and established ways of doing things may hinder the process of working in an empowering way, especially because it is not a fixed method. Someone might perceive empowering ways of working as a threat for his/her status quo and it can be difficult and time consuming to convince that improving ways of working can be beneficial for both service users and staff. (Empowering ways of working 2009, 4.)

One felt that the cooperation with professionals was seamless from the very beginning. However, attitudes of local social workers and other professionals were mentioned as challenges by two of the interviewees. Planning of services with participation of service users was initially unrealistic and unprecedented for some of the professionals as they felt that they are social workers; they are educated and know how things should be done – why should they listen to service users? This reflected to the service users who felt that there is no point to express their opinions and ideas because they are not heard anyways. Furthermore, it was stated that some social workers failed to understand how important it is to sincerely meet a person as a person and not only as a service user. They were accustomed to determine what people need and in what way they should be helped.

To change attitudes requires a lot of time. One reason for the slow process was the fact that the social workers could not dedicate themselves to Own keys – project entirely but it was extra work on top of their daily routines. One of the interviewees estimated that the process could have been easier and faster if

there had been more time to spend on the spot. In that case, there would have been an opportunity to be involved in daily work and go through the process side by side with the worker. The interviewee also considered that there was a certain contradiction between the aims of the project and the execution process. The aim was to impact the attitudes of professionals so that they would not determine from outside what kind of help and services the service users are entitled to or in need for but to plan these together. However, in a same way the experts by experience came from outside to tell how the professionals should do their work. The rules should be same for all and the cooperation reciprocal and equal. Again, this problem could have been solved with more time.

6.1.3 Support during and after the project

All of the interviewees felt that they got enough support from the project coordinator and from each other during the project. The experts by experience worked as a team even though they had their own target cities and therefore they could always reflect and discuss together throughout the process. However, there was a concern that the local service users did not receive enough support because they might not have supportive network to reflect their feelings with and the expert by experience was able to visit the city usually only once a month. It is not sufficient that you give a voice to someone but you also have to carry responsibility afterwards and make sure that the person can reflect his/hers feelings. Some of the interviewees felt that it was not clear enough who should have the responsibility of supporting the service users because the experts by experience did not have the possibility to work as mentors due to the lack of resources.

All of the interviewees felt that the initial attitudes of the local professionals and service providers had changed and participation of service users had become more natural part of their daily work. But even if/when the service user is part of the work community the same problem might still remain: who is responsible of offering mental support for the service user? Because for the service users participation is not only work but it is their own life they are sharing and it can

arouse personal feelings and emotions and therefore it is important that they could receive appropriate support.

One of the interviewees felt that the nature of projects is what causes problems: a project is financed for a certain period of time and when the time is up and money has been used, the project stops like it has hit a wall. The project can have good intensions and initiate advisable development but without proper follow-up it can be money poured down the drain which is also wrong towards the financier.

6.2 Development of work methods

One of the main aims of this study is to identify methods that were functional and to find solutions to those challenges that impeded the Own keys –project. This chapter also highlights issues that should be taken into consideration when planning a development projects such as the Own keys –project. Moreover, some new ideas for improvement are introduced.

6.2.1 Well-being and support of experts by experience

As stated before, all of the interviewees felt that they had started the project as if they were blind-folded. Later on during the interview I referred to this topic and asked whether they feel that they should have been provided with more information or guidance when they started to work in this project.

One replied that the opportunity to participate in expert by experience –training was offered but the interviewee had refused. It was felt that the own experience was enough and worth preserving as such and training might alter it. Besides, it was thought that no education can offer such insight or completeness than underwent experience itself can.

However, all of the interviewees stressed that in this kind of project it is crucially important to make sure that the experts by experience have enough distance to

their own background. To convince one's competence for this kind of work for both local service users and professional workers one has to share one's life story over and over again. This arouses feelings and emotions and experts by experience might not have the tools to deal with them which can be harmful for their wellbeing. Therefore enough time should be guaranteed for them to go through these feelings preferably with a professional worker.

Moreover, the participation of experts by experience is usually more concrete and straightforward: they have a certain role or task; they perform it and that is it. The result of their participation is visible immediately in a form of salary, for example. But the nature of Own keys –project required much more motivation from the experts by experience because they did not have a certain role or task; their aim was to create goals and tasks depending on what the project city was in need for. In addition, as the development object was planning of services and constructions, the results were not visible immediately but it might take years before concrete results. Without strong motivation, one can easily get frustrated. However, all of the interviewees felt that they got sufficiently support from the project coordinator as well as from each other. Nonetheless, this is an important theme and it should always be ensured that the experts by experience are adequately recovered before they start in a project like this.

6.2.2 Natural curiosity

One challenge was to bring the local service users and professionals together. Professionals have different working methods and tools. These help to set protective limits so that the workers would not take their work too personally which then enables them to work rationally. But as one of the interviewees pointed out, the main basis for this line of work is the creation of trustful relationship. In order to do that one has to meet person on a same level, as a person to person, not as a professional to person. There is a power imbalance when the service user or expert by experience works as a whole person but the other one hides behind professional identity. The results of this kind of interaction are often more or less predefined and the information can be biased.

It does not mean that one should give up his/hers professionalism or share one's private life but if there is natural curiosity towards the other person it gives more space for both parties to genuinely express themselves.

6.2.3 Approaching the project without a ready-made model

One of the interviewees stated that the best approach for starting a development project is to start without any model. As in this project the aim was not to start something new from the scratch but to develop those services that already existed. All of the cities had functional services and methods and the aim was solely to improve these services by adding in the voice of local service users. There are certain standards regarding housing services which guarantees that the services are equal for everyone all around Finland. These standards provide the basic frames within the services are developed. Therefore the development is focused on the content of the services and the extent of development is based on the available resources. Therefore it is not possible to create a model which could be implemented in all of the organizations and target cities. Instead, the development is started by negotiating with the service providers – what would be beneficial to your organization, what are you lacking, what can we offer you? In conclusion, it was estimated that the best approach for this kind of work is to be open and primarily discuss with people, negotiate about the development needs together.

6.2.4 Working partner -model

Two of the three interviewees recommended a working partner –model, in which expert by experience works side by side with a professional worker. In this case, I refer both to the local service users and the experts by experience who worked in the Own keys –project. This model would enable expert by experience to be on an equal level with the professional and thus make it easier to affect on service planning and make one's opinions heard. This model would also allow professional worker to familiarize himself/herself with the environment and characteristics of homelessness. In other words, the

relationship between expert by experience and professional worker would be reciprocal, which would then enable to combine different kind of information – information originating from diverse basis. This kind of partnership would also make creating a trustful relationship easier and perhaps diminish the challenges that occurred because of the fixed attitudes of professional workers.

It was also stated that experts by experience are often very emphatic and they have a strong will to help and even safe people from the same situation they have been in before. However, it is emotionally rough to work in this kind of environment in which people are suffering from homelessness, alcoholism and mental health problems. One has to set boundaries and be aware of one's own limits. Experts by experience might not always possess the tools for making such boundaries which can then lead to collapsing of well-being, because they might not be able to leave work at workplace but they carry the worry with them. However, if there is a professional as a working partner the professional can help to set limits and provide experts by experience with tools and methods he/she has received from education. Thus, the professional can provide support and conversational reflection, which would at least partly solve the problem of adequate support for service users.

6.2.5 Co-operation with universities of applied sciences

The fixed attitudes of professionals were identified as one of the major challenges during the project. To tackle this problem one interviewee strongly recommended more cooperation between experts by experience and universities of applied sciences. Because education is where it all starts; what students read and study is what shapes their attitudes and how they work as future professionals. The interviewee suggested that experts by experience could visit schools and have conversations with students. This interaction would be regular and perhaps even part of curriculum. Students would be provided with understanding and insight on what it actually is to meet a person on a grass-root level. This interaction would prevent from prejudices and offer ground for developing new, exceptional working methods. The experts by experience

should not only come from the field of homelessness but from the fields of child welfare, mental health and so forth. In my opinion, such cooperation and interaction would familiarize students with different lines of work and thus make it easier to find one's own place in society as a social worker.

7 DISCUSSION

There was a strong feeling among the interviewees that there was not enough time for the project to reach its aims. However, all of them estimated that significant change in attitudes had transpired in all of the target cities. The voice of the local service users is now considered more in daily work and those professionals who initially resisted the whole concept are now maintaining participatory approach. In some organizations the culture of work has developed and even the inner values and rules of organizations have changed. The project also managed to strengthen the co-operation between different service providers which is essential when homeless services are planned. In addition, there is more co-operation between different cities which enables the information of favorable working methods to transfer from one place to another.

In some cities, the networks of local service users are also reinforced and participation in Own keys –project has been helpful in their own recovery process. The network is sustained by the service users themselves which implies that the project has succeeded in empowering people.

Innovative development projects such as the Own keys –project can always be developed even further, that is the nature of such projects – to develop. However, the Own keys –project has initiated change, it has shown a way to do things differently. It can take time before significantly visible results but this project among other similar projects are with persistence pushing our society towards change. The Own keys –project has faced success and challenges but more importantly, promising solutions to those challenges have been found within the project, from the experts by experience.

However, the Own keys –project cannot nor want to provide a model that could be implemented as such in other similar projects. Unprejudiced, open-minded and constantly adapting project simply does not fit in any frames. Nonetheless, it has identified issues that are worth taking into consideration in future.

7.1 Expert by experience – the problematic term

The term 'expert by experience' has been a problematic part of this thesis from the very beginning. Who is, in fact, an expert by experience? The term is the core of this thesis yet it manages to escape any definitions. By some definition one has to receive training in order to become an expert by experience. In this case, however, there was no training whatsoever. The ones I interviewed used the term to refer both to themselves as well as those I have called 'service users'. It seems like we all have a different understanding when we talk about experts by experience. Besides, aren't we all experts of our own experience?

The fact that expert by experience is not a fixed term frustrated me a long time. I wanted to be able to pin it down, to be able to describe it precisely because that would have made my work much easier. Initially I also hoped that the term would become more fixed as I proceed. I do not wish that anymore.

If the term is defined too rigorously it will set limits. When someone has experienced homelessness he/she can become an experienced expert of homelessness. As a result, person who has had extremely limited identity – homeless – then receives another limited identity – expert by experience. People are interested in that particular experience but what about the other experiences the person has? No one is merely 'homeless' or 'expert by experience' but perhaps a son, a father, a musician, a carpenter. People have several different roles in their lives but sadly we are often interested in that one particular role, homeless. Homelessness is undoubtedly a traumatic experience and it is cruel to make that person go through that experience over and over again. Working as an expert by experience can be beneficial as it can help person to recover but it is important to keep in mind that the person should not be viewed only as an expert by experience but as a whole individual. Sufficient support should be offered for the person to reflect feelings that the work as expert by experience arouses. At some point it might also become current to support expert by experience leave that role behind, because undoubtedly no

one wishes to be seen as ex-homeless or ex-alcoholic for the rest of his/hers life.

We do need terminology in our society in order to do things and launch development projects such as the Own keys –project. But we must be careful not to make too strict definitions because it limits opportunities. And yet again, the question of power arises. Who has the power to decide what expertise by experience is? Social workers or perhaps academic researchers?

As one of the interviewees stated, in Own keys –project the term expert by experience did not have limited definition but it was vague. Therefore experts by experience were able to adapt and change according the situation and the work took different shapes and levels as the project proceeded. I strongly recommend that this aspect is taken into consideration in future when services and working methods are developed together with experts by experience. Because the voice of expertise is not genuine if it has been predefined and we are willing to hear only certain parts of it.

7.2 Professional development

For me this thesis process has been a long struggle. The topic has been buried out of despair and disbelief and it took me a while before I was able to give it another attempt. However, this struggle has taught me a lot about myself. I have gained confidence and at this point I finally feel competent to move on to working life.

I have learned a great deal about experienced based expertise no matter how vague the whole concept might be. The spirit of "Nothing about us without us" has stuck to me for good and as a professional I will cherish the spirit and act accordingly. In addition, I wish to unveil existing power imbalances – the influence of Peter Beresford is undeniable. I want to work towards the change that in future services are not planned for people but with them. If we only see

people as the targets of our work they are likely to remain as such. But if we work in an empowering way together, we can start to reach for the ultimate goal of making ourselves scarce.

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APPENDIX 1: The interview questions.

Theme one: The beginning of Own keys –project

- What was your role in Own keys project?
- What kind of aims and expectations did you have towards the project?

Theme two: Reflecting the Own keys project

- In your opinion, how well did the project succeed in reaching its goals?
- What kind of challenges and problems occurred?
- What went well?

Theme three: Development ideas

- How should the work methods be developed in future, when experts by experience are developing services? In other words, what should be done differently in order to avoid the challenges that occurred during the Own keys –project?
- Which working methods were successful and worth preserving in future?
- In what way could experts by experience be prepared to work in a similar project?
- In what way could professionals be prepared to work in a similar development project with experts by experience?

APPENDIX 2: The interview questions in Finnish.

Teema 1: Omat avaimet – hankkeen aloitus.

- Mikä oli roolisi Omat avaimet –hankkeessa?
- Minkälaisia olivat tavoitteesi ja odotuksesi hankkeen suhteen?

Teema 2: Omat avaimet –hankkeen arviointi.

- Kuinka hyvin hankkeen tavoitteet mielestäsi saavutettiin?
- Minkälaisia haasteita tai ongelmia ilmeni?
- Mikä meni hyvin?

Teema 3: Hankkeen kehittäminen.

- Miten toimintatapoja pitäisi jatkossa kehittää, kun kokemusasiantuntijat ovat mukana kehittämässä palveluita? Toisin sanoen, mitä pitäisi tehdä erilailla, jotta jatkossa ei törmättäisi samoihin ongelmiin?
- Mitkä toimintatavat olivat onnistuneita ja säilyttämisen arvoisia jatkossakin?
- Miten kokemusasiantuntijoita tulisi valmentaa vastaaviin hankkeisiin?
- Miten virkamiestahoja tulisi valmentaa työskentelyyn kokemusasiantuntijoiden kanssa?