

Themes in this evaluation series:

Perceptions of social networks amongst housing and care providers 2

Challenges in making social networks real for the people we work with – discussions with service providers 4

Organisational readiness for social networks approaches – Loretto Care 6

Responses to Social Networks Training 8

Contact 10

Further case studies in 2009:

- Implementing social networks approaches in Loretto Care projects
- The impact of strengthening young people's social networks in youth homelessness projects

Social networks

Social networks are a vital part of individual wellbeing. Social networks are the connections individuals make to family, friends, their community and services, which they can use for social contact, support and resources for living full lives.

For many years we have recognized that beyond our physical needs, human beings have safety needs, social needs, belonging needs and esteem needs that contribute to the realization of our potential (Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, in a Theory of Human Motivation, 1946). All of these require relationships with others

around us.

More contemporary discussions of wellbeing continue to focus on personal *and* social dimensions of wellbeing in happy, functioning people, in which supportive relationships, trust and belonging are key indicators (New Economics Foundation, 2009).

When working in services providing support for people, how much do we recognize and develop the social networks of the people we work with? What role can social networks play in supporting people and enabling them to use

our services effectively and lead full and independent lives? How do we help isolated, vulnerable or challenging people to strengthen their social networks, and make stronger connections to friends, family and their communities?

The Scottish Social Networks Forum aims to raise awareness of the role of social networks in supporting people to achieve their potential, and help services to develop their approaches to identifying and strengthening the social networks of their service users.

It is crucial that people feel a sense of relatedness to other people, so that in addition to the personal, internally focused elements, people's social experiences – the degree to which they have supportive relationships and a sense of connection with others – form a vital aspect of well-being.

National Accounts of Wellbeing, New Economics Foundation

Evaluation

Scottish Social Networks Forum commissioned an evaluation of its training programme in 2008, delivered to a large voluntary sector housing, health and social care provider.

Loretto Care initiated an ambitious programme to train all local managers in its health and social care services, who would then cascade training to their staff teams, and ultimately, embed the approach in practice with service users. Loretto agreed to collaborate with Scottish

Social Networks Forum (SSNF) to assess the impact of the training on staff and, in time, on service users. A series of interviews were conducted with eight project managers working with a diverse range of people, ranging from alcohol dependent older people, people recovering from addiction, young homeless people and young people moving on from care, people with learning difficulties and people with physical disabilities.

This evaluation series gives brief overviews of a selection of issues arising from

planning and implementing Social Networks Training in an organization with such diverse service users.

A final stage of interviews with project managers is planned when the approach has been embedded in practice, to explore the difference the approach makes for service users.

Thanks to staff of Loretto Care for the time given to this evaluation.

"I suppose for me it means their families, their friends and then agencies like ourselves, and even whether they belong to any clubs like sport, social things, and kind of contact with anybody else other than just themselves. You're looking to get folk involved with people because a lot of folk don't have any friends, or with their families things have broken down"

What does 'social networks' mean?

A selection of 8 Loretto managers were asked about their understanding of social networks prior to the training, and the relevance of the concept to their service users. Between them, the managers were responsible for twelve services working in different ways (residential

and outreach). Their diverse service users included people leading relatively settled lives and people in transition between services or between accommodation.

There was a strong consensus that social networks were an important aspect of realising Loretto's values

(expressed without prompting by service managers) to ensure that "the staff can provide the service users with the best quality of life they're going to get, and to make sure they are living up to their potential".

Quality of life – the added value of social networks

"Fundamentally what we're about is temporary accommodation with a vulnerable client group in a challenging setting – you could look at it that that's all you need to do"

All of the service managers expressed a strong ethos of continuous improvement, focused on ensuring their service is as good as it can be for the people they support. For some, this meant looking beyond what they currently provide to see how they could add value to their work. This requires constantly finding ways to focus on what their service users experience outside their service -

"We always encourage people to have links with their families – it would be easy to forget that, because they seem to have a social network with all the people that live here".

Some managers highlighted the importance of social networks to help establish sustainable practical support for people beyond the service they received from Loretto.

"Things like social networks for when they move on are probably equally as important as some of the things that we focus on".

"Having access to external agencies...to make sure their health and wellbeing is as good as it can be, given the nature of their lifestyles".

Some managers believed that social networks were an important aspect of the personal development of the people they support.

"Make them more responsible, bring more appropriate interactions with other people, it would deal with things like loneliness. There must be elements of depression in people who've become ostracised from their family, living in a strange place".

"Some aspect of normality outwith the project, it can become a very insular experience living with people who have very similar patterns of behavior, so any networks outwith their lifestyle could be very therapeutic".

A smaller number of managers recognised that, for people who are long term and regular service users, there is potential for an imbalance in their social networks, with a high level of reliance on paid professionals. Here, an important purpose of staff involved in developing social networks was

"to get some social networks that's not just paid staff as well".

Some managers also felt that their service environments provided a kind of social network which was not always beneficial for people they work with.

"They're not socially isolated from each other but from the outside world".

Multi-agency working

Many of the managers assumed that social networks primarily would involve linking their service users into other agencies.

“Opening up staff networks to the multiple agencies that we work with, whoever would be involved in the service users’ care packages”.

“Would be about enabling them to feel more independent in accessing all of the health services and social networks in the community, like GPs, and ensuring they feel confident and capable of doing that”.

“We could probably do better at finding the resources for the young person that are an option.... We do it in terms of referring to other agencies, trying to get other people involved”.

All of the managers felt that making best use of other agencies in their communities was important, but also challenging.

“If the resource isn’t out there, it’s irrelevant what I think”.

“Some local opportunities are not geared up to welcome young people – I suppose it’s about what am I doing to make that an available resource for the people who come through the places I work in”.

Half of the managers talked about the need to focus some time and energy on ensuring that staff were aware of local agencies that could be an opportunity, source of support or information for their service users.

“So we have some idea of what’s out there and what we can use, what we can tap into, so that when we come back we can say to staff there is this, or have you considered that”.

Social networks vs activities

All of the managers tended to consider *activities* as an indicator of their service users’ social networks and the focus of their service efforts to encourage and support the development of social networks.

“Does social networking always mean recreation? Is going for a roll on sausage in a local café with a worker social networking?”

For some, an emphasis on social networks meant re-assessing the quality and range of activities available to their service users – where these were seen to be of high quality (for example skiing for one service user, holidays abroad for others) there was less concern about social networks, even though the activities mentioned were accessed only with paid workers.

However, the concept of social networks caused some managers to consider how much of service users’ lives involve activities which are designed for people with specific needs, and as such, may be based on narrow assumptions of their aspirations, interests and abilities

“That they’re able to attend things not just with labels on it – this is for learning disabilities, this is for you if you’re deaf – it’s looking for things that can make their social life as full as possible”.

Some managers did consider the quality and range of *relationships* which service users were able to develop and sustain. For some, this was a major aspect of supporting service users to make progress in their lives.

“Probably some of the most chaotic people in society and I think the big thing that’s missing from their lives is social networks in terms of having people to rely on, people to chat to, to go to in times of crisis”.

Managers recognised that some individuals simply prefer limited or very simple social networks, and some have a stronger need for very routine and familiar interactions, with consideration of this more likely in services for people with mental health problems, learning difficulties or older service users. Managers felt it was important to allow individuals to identify their own goals in relation to social networks, particularly for those who may have damaged relationships in their past.

However, some managers recognised the ways in which we can easily value some social networks over others, in terms of our judgement about their appropriateness for service users.

“Staff are already quite conscious about getting to know a young person and seeing who is important in their life, and trying to get them to make contact with those people and make less contact with the people who seem to cause them the most problem”.

“They’re really looking forward to their own tenancies, but what hits them when they get there is loneliness”

Making social networks real for our service users

Managers discussed the potential challenges for taking forward social networks ideas and approaches within their services.

This aspect of the evaluation will be followed up in case studies – any solutions the services find will be specific to the particular needs of their service users and remit of their service.

This overview of the challenges which managers discussed is not meant to represent the potential for a steep learning and implementation curve for organisations considering social networks.

Rather, the challenges identified confirm the importance of social networks to a diverse range of people using

services for support. Some of the challenges identified also illustrate the importance of a national Scottish Social Networks Forum, to inform and inspire policy makers and service commissioners to regard social networks as an essential survival tool for vulnerable people, which both services and commissioners have a role in helping them develop.

Social networks and life transitions

Several of the projects planning to take forward social networks in their practice have a focus on some kind of life transition –leaving care; leaving homelessness accommodation for a tenancy; working away from addiction and dependency towards recovery; and for some, simply being rehoused within Loretto accommodation. A theme emerged in discussion that managers are far more positive about the potential for social networks to make a positive impact on people’s lives where service users are adjusting to other changes.

“For some individuals that we work with they’re saying they want to break away from that [chaotic lifestyle]. But it’s hard, because everything, to them, in terms of who they drink with, who they socialise with, and what they do every day, is a social network”.

“I think there are so many young people from care who have maybe been in <out of authority residential care> for 4 years, from 12-16. They maybe have a family in Stirling, a local connection to get housing, but they don’t know anybody. They have no social networks and they’re very isolated. It’s very easy to say you should be in work or in training but they’re maybe not ready for that. It’s trying to find something they will accept and gradually getting them accepted again in their local community”.

Where service users are more established in services, or are long term residents and particularly older service users, managers were more doubtful that they would be interested in developing their social networks in any way.

“We have a client who is 74 who has no intention of changing her life whatsoever, is happy to do her own thing, she has her own social network of shopkeepers, people she’s known about the area, she’s fulfilled and happy” (service user with mental illness).

“I don’t expect it to be successful with the older client group really, just because of their long standing issues and their ingrained ideas of what they want their lives to be” (service users with ongoing alcohol addiction).

“There are a number of service users who’ve been there since the place was built about 27 years ago and they moved there from <long stay hospital institution>, so they’ve been institutionalised all their lives. Those people tend not to have very strong social networks, quite set in their ways and quite routine. Quite elderly as well” (service users with learning disabilities).

Some of Loretto’s services do provide long term tenancies, up to the point where service users move onto higher levels of nursing care for elderly people, or die. Managers working in these services did feel that social networks would become part of their work over a long period of time, with tenant turnover

Services with a shorter term engagement with service users felt that looking at people’s social networks was an essential aspect of their work, because non-residential care packages could be very limited.

“They’ve got this artificial family feeling about the staff...when you go out and you’ve got your own home, you don’t – then you’ve got 2 hours a week” (young people in hostel accommodation).

Ready and willing

All of the managers interviewed could name individual service users and the ways in which social networks might be introduced to them or could anticipate their response to approaches. In some services, it was clear that the most important factor in introducing social networks thinking into their practice was the patience and doggedness of staff.

“For some people with low aspirations who don't have goals in relation to social networks or any social goals, it can be hard, and that can be lost along the way because staff think okay, we'll get back to that...then it's given up by the staff as well”.

“For somebody sitting on a 3 hour package it might take a year to introduce some different areas into their social network”.

Managers felt that timing was a crucial aspect of introducing social networks, in particular, waiting until initial assessments and paperwork are over, and a new service user has 'settled in' before starting to explore their social networks with them. For others, it needs to be an early intervention to help people fill gaps in their lives created by transitions.

“They've got trepidation about going into a hostel. If we did that initially it would be a totally pointless exercise, but after a few weeks, after they've settled in”.

“I think if you don't get into it quick enough it's very easy to fall back into that chaotic lifestyle”.

One service providing outreach support for 'hard to engage' people whose chaotic lifestyles include homelessness and addiction, felt that opportunities for using social networks approaches with this group of service users would be too difficult to contemplate in a crisis response mode, until a service user was becoming settled and ready for change.

“One of the services I oversee is about people who don't engage, and I thought that might cause difficulties. I think the training reinforced my belief on that”.

Capacity and commissioning

While the managers were positive about introducing social networks to their teams and supporting staff to put the ideas and approaches into practice, it was clear from their considerations that they are being positive and focusing on benefits to service users against a tide of health and social care commissioning that pares services to the bare bones.

One manager described negotiating a care package for a young man who has schizophrenia, who was preparing to move into his own tenancy after being in hospital for 18 years since the age of 16. She managed to negotiate with care managers to increase the care package from 7 hours a week to 10 hours a week.

“I don't think it's to do with 'what social networks have they got' I think it's to do with what's in the pot”.

Other managers described the practical challenges of meeting their service users' needs within non-residential support.

“Your 2 hours are spent chasing Council Tax, so you don't have the resource. You could take information but that alone probably won't deliver. If someone's on 6 hours then you've got the opportunity to get them involved in things”.

Even within a residential setting, managers are juggling shifts and handover times, firstly to deliver the training to staff, and secondly to try to arrange for support to service users.

“If you've got two staff on a shift, you can only do the 'getting them to something that's on in the community' the first time. Ideally we would go with them and keep going with them to motivate them, but feasibly it's just impossible”.

Finally, some projects described tiny 'social budgets', for example £2000 for a throughput of around 100 service users a year. They would use this to enable staff to support service users to go along to new opportunities, or to create social events within their services. However they felt that supporting service users to develop and sustain social networks required greater investment. Managers were realistic about the financial choices service users make with their own limited funds.

“Service users have about £49 a week and they pay their service charges roughly £14 a week, and by the time they've paid for their smoking, their food, if they spend £20 a week on food, they've got £15 a week left, what are they going to do with that?”

“It’s the big think about Loretto, we’re well used to change, because we’ve grown so much and we’ve had to adapt to the changing face of social care”

The organisational context for change and development

Introducing new ideas and approaches to small staff teams in busy and demanding care services requires careful planning and management.

The eight managers interviewed were confident in their ability to introduce social networks and could easily identify potential constraints and enabling

factors they could use in their projects. All of the managers were asked to consider factors within Loretto Care that would hinder or enable implementation of social networks approaches, and some key aspects of organisational strengths.

There was a strong consensus that each project

was given a great deal of autonomy within a very supportive framework, to implement initiatives for the benefit of services users.

Each of the eight managers had been with the organisation for many years, achieving promotion and moving to new challenges over time.

A learning organisation

Managers were asked to rate Loretto Care on three dimensions of the process of introducing new ideas: vision, inspiration and momentum.

In the vision dimension, managers rated Loretto highly in terms of regularly introducing new ideas, consulting everyone to help shape and develop ideas, and testing ideas to change and improve on them.

“They do involve everybody, it’s not just like senior management do that or middle management do that, and then support staff think ‘no, I think that’s wrong’, they do get a chance to feed back on everything”.

In the inspiration dimension, managers again rated Loretto highly in terms of people’s expression of passion and commitment in the organisation, willingness to pull together to move things forward, and staff confidence to put forward suggestions. In the latter, Loretto has a cash incentive scheme for ideas from staff.

“I was always so cynical, like a ‘them and us’ culture everywhere else I worked. But [Loretto] give you a huge amount of autonomy, but they support you. The first time I said ‘we’ as opposed to ‘them’ it was a bit of a fright, I hate being so positive!”

Managers also agreed there was a climate within Loretto which encouraged momentum in taking forward new ideas, with flexibility in roles and responsibilities, setting a pace and communication progress and success to each other.

Over all, it is clear that managers stay with Loretto because they feel it is a good organisation to work for. There is every chance that their own commitment and enthusiasm shapes the way they work with their teams – both in setting a good standard for meeting service users’ needs, and in developing and supporting staff.

“Because there’s a career ladder and it’s still capturing my imagination and my passion it’s easy to stay on, there’s still things that are really interesting to me and I’m still learning loads... I’m plugging shamelessly and I don’t mean to!”

All managers referred to Loretto’s Learning and Development Team as an important resource within the organisation, and felt that Loretto’s overall commitment to staff learning and development made a strong contribution to the quality and commitment of support staff.

Measuring what matters

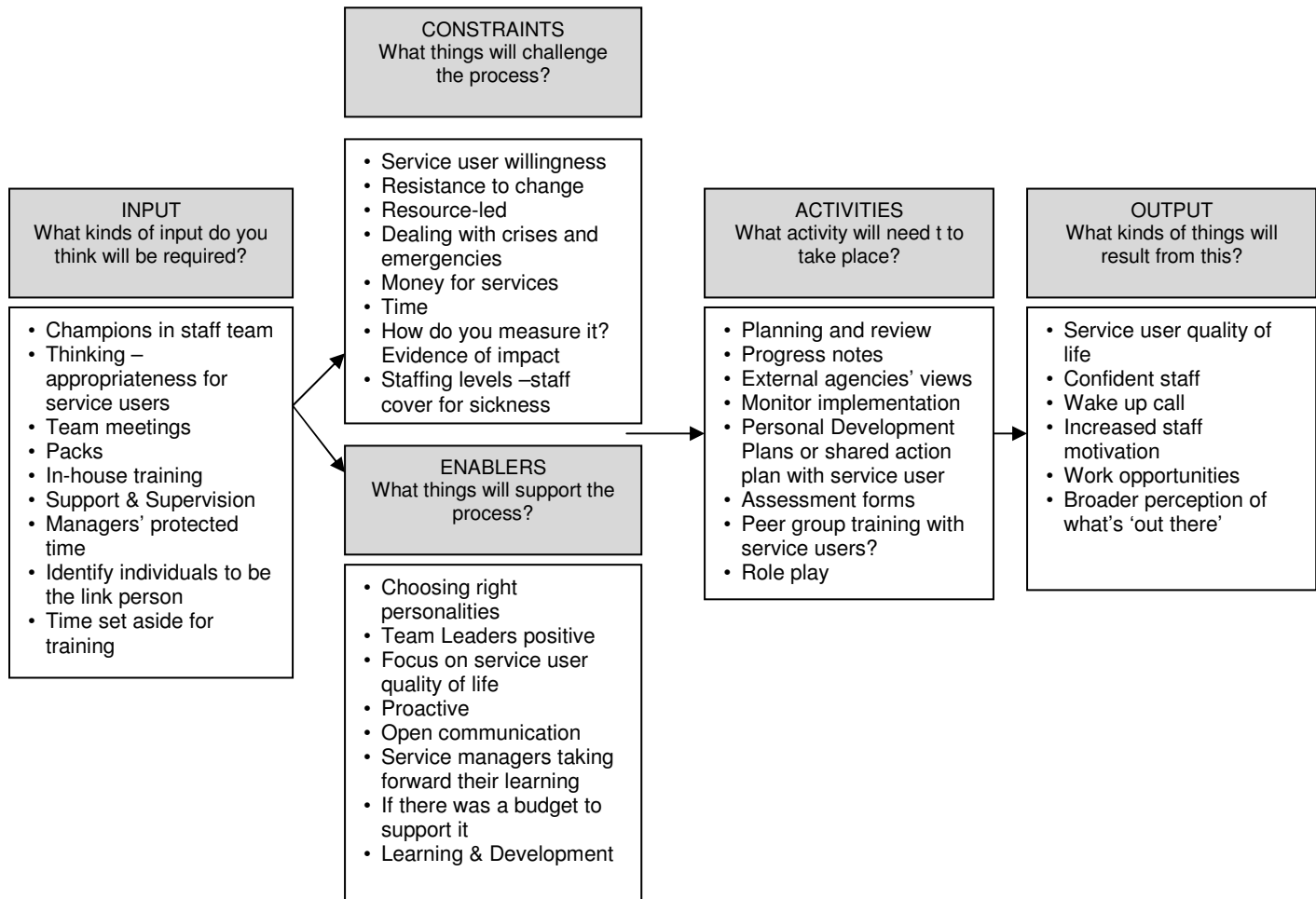
Health and Social Care services have seen significant changes in staff registration requirements and the setting of standards and inspection regimes by the Care Commission. At the same time, they are constantly re-tendering for services in a highly competitive environment. Some managers pointed out the need for hard evidence of the positive impact of social networks for service users, so that commissioners and inspectors could begin to value these.

“I think the challenge is going to be to keep it high profile in amongst all the other stuff. Because the Care Commission is always going to come first, whether that’s conscious or not.... the last thing I want is an ‘unsatisfactory’ Care Commission report”.

“When it comes to service users their health and wellbeing is a higher priority than social inclusion. Certainly with the local authority who pay our money, as far as they’re concerned it is”.

This suggests a role for the Scottish Social Networks Forum in supporting practitioners to measure impact, and collate findings at national level to share with commissioners and policy makers.

Managers used a matrix to plot their assessment of the constraints and enabling factors for introducing social networks to their project, the input they felt would be required, and what they expected to come out of this, summarised here.



Team tactics

Managers identified a number of different features of their management practice which would assist them in encouraging staff to develop their ideas and approaches to support service users' social networks:

- Adapting Personal Development Plans used with service users, or adding guidance encouraging staff to use appropriate sections to think about social networks with the service user
- Encouraging staff to use managers' protected time (a regular 'open door' session) to discuss their ideas and experiences with service users to further develop practice
- Asking staff to use their Reflective Logs to note what they are doing or what might need to be done in relation to a service user's social networks
- Setting staff time aside to compile information on local resources and services which could help young people develop or extend their social networks
- Using weekly 'key worker' forums to exchange information and ideas
- Applying other relevant training to the development of social networks e.g. Solution Focused Approaches, Motivational Interviewing

“I think bridging the gap between something we know is important and doing it is something we can struggle at”

Social Networks Training Evaluation

In addition to interviews with six managers following the training, 28 evaluation forms were completed at the end of the training session using ratings scales on various aspects of the training.

All of the managers were attending the training in order to prepare for their own role in training their

teams and planning for implementation of the approaches.

The training is provided as a one day programme, supported by a trainers' manual which provides a step by step guide to each stage of the training, and associated materials for exercises.

At the training, participants complete a personal action plan which is given to the trainer, who posts it back to participants six weeks later. This process is meant to encourage follow up, acting as a reminder of the intentions of participants as they left the training.

Quality of training

All participants rated the training as very interesting:

- On a scale of 1-5 where 5 is very interesting and 1 is not interesting, 4% rated it at 3; 57% rated it at 4; 39% rated it at 5.

All participants agreed their priorities identified at the start of training were very well met:

- On a scale of 1-5 where 1 is very well met and 5 is not met at all, 14% rated it at 3; 36% rated it at 2; 50% rated it at 1.

Managers interviewed commented that the training was very good and that “the trainer was fantastic”.

“It all made perfect sense, there's nothing about it I disagreed with or thought I couldn't put this across”.

“I think it gave me a greater understanding ...made me think a lot more about it than I had done previously”.

Evaluation forms revealed that participants felt it would be most useful in helping raise awareness of the importance of social networks for their staff. As a result of the training they felt well prepared to deliver it themselves, and thought that it would help their staff focus on their service users' relationships. They left with ideas and new tools to use.

Managers interviewed felt the opportunity to think and reflect during the training was valuable.

“It was a day where you actually had time out to think about social networks, probably not telling you too much that you didn't already know, but just a day out to think about where we can go from here”.

Evaluation forms highlighted the importance of case studies in bringing the issues and approaches to life, and were positive about the pace, interactive nature of the training, and time for personal reflection, to contribute to their insight into working with service users on social networks.

Follow up

None of the six managers interviewed after the training had begun to implement their action plans within five months of attending the training. For many, there were important reasons for this: three had Care Commission inspections during this period, one had to re-tender to deliver their service, two were managing change over two project sites after bringing together services.

All but one of the managers was keen to implement the training at the time most appropriate for their services, and remained keen to embed thinking and practice in relation to social networks within the day to day work of their teams. Only one manager had decided that social networks were not a current priority for his service, in part due to his older client group with significant additional support needs, and partly due to more pressing service development requirements relating to health and care.

The follow up exercise (sending people the action plans they devised at the training), is a useful prompt for participants. However, the reality of managing services suggests that the action plan could be sent after a longer period – or that a refresher seminar within six months of the initial training could help participants stay connected with good intentions, and benefit from others' experience of implementation.

Tools for practice

"I like the circle with the person in the middle and illustrating all their different layers of support. I think the individual and the staff would use it"

"Circles of support – it takes away from being about you making a judgement, it's about getting the person to make their own judgement about their social supports"

Following the training, the Circles of Support tool was mentioned by all managers as a tool they felt could be used within their service. Most appreciated that the approach was not prescriptive, allowing staff to consider which individuals would respond well to the approach and that for some, discussion may be a more effective tool than a visual exercise.

Some felt that the visual record would be a useful addition to reviewing people's progress and could encourage more formal recognition of social networks within personal planning, while others already used a matrix or other assessment tool, and felt this was sufficient.

Some people felt further tools might be useful in their practice, particularly in helping service users develop appropriate skills to develop their social networks.

"I didn't feel the training said 'this identified somebody's lack of skills and what area, and how we would then fix that, or how we would then support them to address those'".

Cascading training to support staff

All managers were confident their staff would respond well to the training, although some identified small elements of change-resistant staff, or staff set in their ways, who may need greater encouragement.

"I think we need to be quite innovative about it, but it's not too far removed from our culture and how we do things anyway".

"I think most of them with the odd exception will be quite keen to do it".

"I'd like to think it fits with their existing skill set, I mean there's nothing in there that's not based on what we do".

Some managers felt that there were some implications for stretching staff, and some practical tasks that might be needed to support implementation.

"[staff] will need really good negotiation skills for some of the service users who will be more reluctant to take it on board".

"We'll need to allocate time to getting useful resources".

Managers felt that, once training has been delivered, there will be an ongoing role in monitoring how staff use it with their service users.

"I think it will be one of those things as a management team we need to monitor quite closely".

"I think the problem is prioritizing all the time, when you're very busy at work, that unless it's embedded in the paperwork and the way we do things, I think that the formality of it maybe could slide".

"Following it up in supervision is definitely going to be a must".

Some managers were looking forward to embedding social networks in their team's practice.

"It has actually inspired a wee bit of progression towards a specific way of working with service users".

"I think when we deliver training at project level it will be interesting because we can talk about individuals and where it might work with some people and others it might not".

Scottish Social Networks Forum

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The training pack continues to be developed with updates and additions, together with a new Project Development Toolkit, available on www.scottishsocialnetworks.org

The training was delivered by Allison Calder and co-ordinated within Loretto Care by Kathleen McColligan.

Scottish Social Networks Forum

The Scottish Social Networks Forum was created in response to recommendations in the Homelessness Task Force Final Report 2001. It brings organisations concerned with homelessness and social inclusion together to:

- Develop and deliver training in social networks approaches
- Raise awareness of the need for positive social networks
- Support the development and integration of befriending, mentoring and mediation services
- Support and engage service providers in developing assessments and provision to support social networks for people affected by homelessness, at risk of homelessness, or experiencing other challenges

The SSFN offers a free newsletter and hub for information sharing and collaboration. Contact info@scottishsocialnetworks.org

Further information and resources

www.scottishsocialnetworks.org

- Training calendar
- Contacts – who is working on social networks throughout Scotland
- Events and seminars
- Consultations
- Research and evaluation reports
- Tools for practitioners
- Case studies
- Useful links