

ORIGINS AND ACTIVITIES OF A SELF-HELP SUPPORT CENTER IN NOTTINGHAM, UNITED KINGDOM

NICKI HASTIE

Self Help Nottingham, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

Self Help Nottingham is a specialist agency with seventeen years experience in the self-help field. This article introduces SHN's work within the wider context of United Kingdom voluntary sector, health and social welfare initiatives. Examples of effective and innovative practice are highlighted to demonstrate the agency's activities and priorities for development.

ORIGINS

Self Help Nottingham (SHN) is a specialist agency that has provided support for self-help and mutual aid initiatives in Nottingham, United Kingdom and surrounding areas, for seventeen years. Right from the beginning, with Judy Wilson as the first project worker, the organization contributed to self-help research and development and developed many national and international contacts.

SHN was relaunched as an independent registered charity in April 1997, but began life in 1982 as a project within the local voluntary sector development agency, Nottingham Council for Voluntary Service (NCVS). NCVS had been working with individual groups since 1975 but recognized that a special development project would increase the number and effectiveness of local groups and believed that self-help groups need and welcome support and resources. The Nottingham Self Help Groups Project was set up with financial support from the Area Health Authority. Renamed The Self Help Team in January 1984, the project continued under the auspices of NCVS until March 1997.

CURRENT ACTIVITIES OF SHN

- Has developed and maintains information databases on local and national groups
- Provides practical development and support services for groups and for professionals working with self-help groups
- Supports newly-developing and existing self-help groups, including the provision of training
- Is building up a resource collection on self-help research and development, both UK-based and international
- Works with groups to define self-help and promote the value of mutual support groups

The initial idea to support and to provide resources for self-help groups continues, but the services provided by SHN are expanding and developing to meet the changing needs of self-help groups and to adapt to SHN's status as a newly-independent voluntary organization within a local, national, and international framework. Since the closure of the National Self Help Centre based at NCVO (National Council for Voluntary Organisations) in March 1995, there has been a greater emphasis on Nottingham as a focus for self-help support nationally. This is due partly to the stability of the project, its history and experience of work with self-help groups, and its size. Most other practitioners in the United Kingdom supporting the development of self-help groups are single workers within a Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) or similar organization. SHN currently has eight part-time paid workers and eleven volunteers. The stability of the organization has been enabled in part by the long-standing relationship with the local Health Authority, which still provides the majority of funding.

In some ways, self-help has gained a more central profile on the national agenda. Recent legislation and government reports, such as The Patient's Charter, Care in the Community, the Carers' Act, and the Disability Discrimination Act give increasing priority to the patient and carer voice and to the need for health and social welfare services to work collaboratively with users. Purchasers and providers of health services in the National Health Service (NHS) are required to involve users in evaluation. They often welcome the facilitative role which self-help development organizations can play in providing contact with self-help groups, which offer access to a valued "collective" user perspective. The change of Government to New Labour in 1997 has not as yet introduced significant messages for the future of self-help, but there is room to keep self-help on the agenda of any national review of the voluntary sector.

A new source of funding for the voluntary sector has come through the National Lottery Charities Board which has recognized the need for a developed and skilled infrastructure to support community initiatives. This has included the setting up of new self-help projects. Our research shows there are eighteen specialist self-help projects in England. The long-term development of these projects may be harder to predict because of the time limited nature of funding.

The status of SHN as the nearest England has to a national center is largely informal, but some recognition was given to SHN's ability to play a coordinating role in the United Kingdom at a national conference organized by the Trent Regional Forum of Self Help Workers in June 1997. At this conference, SHN agreed to coordinate the production of a national newsletter for self-help workers (Self Help Network News). Further, because of SHN's existing collection of resources, it was nominated as a center where researchers may deposit articles and publications relating to self-help and mutual aid. SHN is also supporting researchers elsewhere in the United Kingdom who are considering the need for a national support network, both for self-help groups and for development workers.

The following introduces some practical examples of SHN's work which may be of particular interest to other practitioners around the world, and our ideas for future developments.

INFORMATION

SHN has always taken practical note of enquiries and monitored changing patterns in requests for aid. This has led to partnerships with other agencies to consider the need for increased services (as well as self-help groups) around issues which aren't locally supported, e.g., in the past this has included support after termination of pregnancy, eating disorders, tranquilizers, fertility services.

A recent project grew from the number of enquiries SHN received from individuals in other parts of the United Kingdom who were seeking self-help groups in their local area but didn't know who could help. In order to link people with directly relevant support and to provide named contacts, where possible, we undertook research to identify development agencies which offer support on a local level to self-help groups throughout England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. This information is now held on database at SHN and is also published as a directory.

New technology and IT developments, particularly the Internet, feature strongly in SHN's priorities for the future. We began to assess our developing use of online services in 1997, working with the Department of Information and Library Studies at Loughborough University. This has offered some pointers for

good practice in planning Web-based resources. We hope to undertake feasibility studies to see how SHN can best advise and work with groups on using the Internet. The need for good data collection, evaluation, and ethical issues in Internet self-help are subjects we hope to discuss further with others around the world.

GROUP DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING

SHN has developed an effective way of supporting new groups which emphasizes the principles of self-help and minimizes the bias of “professionalized” support. Group development is supported by a team of four volunteer group support workers and one paid worker. The volunteer group support workers are all individuals who have already gone through the self-help experience and are usually still actively involved as participants in one or more self-help groups. In this way, those experienced with self-help support others who are new to self-help. Group support workers are offered training and encouraged to develop their own group skills and training skills. As well as visiting and working closely with individual groups, they can also be available generally for group members to talk to at other training events and networking opportunities organized by SHN. At any one time in the Nottingham area as many as sixty groups can be in the early stages of development or at a thinking stage. Examples of recent new groups include African-Caribbean Elders, Cutting Back (a group for women who self-harm), and a support group for parents whose children have been excluded from school.

NETWORKING OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROUPS

SHN aims to facilitate cooperation between self-help groups and between the self-help sector and health and social welfare services. Strong links have been developed with the two main hospitals in Nottingham. Both are teaching hospitals and this strong contact allows SHN and local self-help groups to feed directly into the curriculum of medical students. Hospital network meetings currently involve sixty-six different self-help groups and aim to:

- open up productive channels of communication, particularly in proposed developments in health care
- encourage work in partnership to identify gaps or opportunities for improvements in existing service provision at all levels of patient, user, and carer experience: pre-admission, hospital stay, visiting, discharge, day care, and out-patient services

- create opportunities for sharing and updating information about self-help groups and the support they offer.

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

SHN is supporting the establishment of a research and development network to link UK practitioners and researchers in self-help. A small group met for the first time in October 1997 to consider the way forward for a network which could increase collaboration between self-help groups, practitioners and researchers and enhance the identity and understanding of self-help in the United Kingdom. The network will include people actively involved in the field of self-help development, as well as community-based and academic researchers. Members are beginning to map research which has already been done in the United Kingdom and a database of current and potential research ideas is being planned.

For More Information Contact:

Research and Development

Jan Myers, Director
Nicki Hastie, Information worker

Group Development and Training

Caroline Bell

Information Team

Nicki Hastie
Marilyn Todd
David Thornton

Administration and Finance

Angela Dobie
Monica McDonald

Direct reprint requests to:

Nicki Hastie
Self Help Nottingham
Ormiston House
32-36 Pelham Street
Nottingham NG1 2EG
United Kingdom
e-mail: selfhelp@globalnet.co.uk
Website: <http://www.selfhelp.org.uk>