'Giving homelessness a <u>home</u> in social work education, training and practice'.

Introduction:
"…a dwelling is more than a building – it is a home" (Garnett, 2015: viii).

It has been a personal and professional contention for most of my social work career (as practitioner and lecturer) that homelessness has been something of a taboo in social work education, training and, as a result, practice (Skelton, 2007, 2010, 2013, 2014; 2016; IFSW, 2013). Indeed, any examination of the social work curriculum, certainly in Northern Ireland, would reveal a paucity of attention afforded to this important human rights theme (Skelton, 2007; Devlin and McKenna, 2009; Kerr, 2011; Coyle, 2013; Devaney, 2014); Rowledge, 2014; Law Centre (NI), 2015; Public Policy Exchange, 2015).

Homelessness is an increasing problem, with an average of 18-19.000 households presenting as homeless on an annual basis in Northern Ireland (NI) (Fitzpatrick et al., 2014; NIHE, 2015; JRF, 2015); and almost doubling in this new millennium (McQuillan, 2016). So much of what causes or results from homelessness is obviously rooted in what is surely the general raison d'être of social work and what it seeks to alleviate (SWPI, 2006; Skelton, 2007, 2013, 2016). This includes interpersonal violence, abuse, relationship breakdown, mental illness, self-harm, addiction, leaving care, etcetera (Skelton, 2007; McManus, 2010; McQuillan, 2010; Morris, 2011; Choi, 2011; Homeless Strategy, 2012-17; Price, 2012; Council for Homeless NI, 2015; Shelter NI, 2015; Simon Community, 2015; and the various 'Isms' (Skelton, 2007; 2016) including sectarianism, racism and so forth) that result in forced eviction or non-allocation of accommodation. Unfortunately, more often than not, any focus on homelessness is generally subsumed in academia within the broader theme of addictions and criminal justice: further exacerbating the inevitable labelisation and stereotyping associated with homelessness!

Obviously this flies in the face of the International Federation's definition of social work (2014), particularly its emphasis on the symbiotic relationship between a person and their environment, and the professions commitment to social justice and human rights! The spectre of homelessness blights many lives in Northern Ireland and the UK more generally, yet its conceptualisation is often framed in terms of being fundamentally a housing issue and any intervention relegated to the local authority (NI Housing Executive), housing associations and homeless providers: with little real engagement of or from social services. In partial mitigation, this may well have been reinforced in NI with the NI Housing Order (1988; 2003; and Housing (Amendment) Act (NI), 2010) which gave a statutory responsibility to the NIHE for homelessness: "***We took over responsibility for dealing with homelessness in 1989***" (NIHE, 2015) and especially with the introduction of the Supporting People Programme (2003). Interestingly this has been paralleled with two other significant developments. Firstly, an increased emphasis in social work on individualism rather than communitarnism, with a marked dilution of community work / development (Das et al., 2015); and corresponding growth in homeless providers and housing associations in NI (Facing the Future, 2012; NIFHA, 2015) and, arguably, a transferring of 'ownership' in terms of intervention.

Indeed, there appears to be a limited appreciation among social work policy-makers, commissioners, regulators, managers, academics and practitioners that homelessness is a reality for many service users and spans the age range, as any child / adolescent in care can readily testify! There is also an overarching legislative (and some policy) obligations (Housing Order (NI), 1998; Children Act, 1989; Children (NI) Order, 1995; Children (leaving care) Act (NI), 2002; Promoting Social Inclusion action plan, 2007; Southwark Ruling, 2009 and subsequently ratified by Judge Tracey in NI (2012); Our Children and Young People-Our Pledge (OFMDFM, 2006-16) to ensure children / adolescents receive social work intervention in accordance with their safeguarding and care needs. This Southwark landmark ruling copper-fastened the social work obligation to respond meaningfully to children / adolescents in need (up to 25); carrying out more complex assessments rather than simply seeing the presenting issue as one of homelessness and abdicating their responsibility accordingly! Furthermore, social services and related public authorities have a mandatory corporate parenting responsibility (Children Act, 1989; Children (NI) Order, 1995; Access all Areas report, 2012; Access to Success strategy, 2012).

On the other hand, I would also caution that we must resist the penchant for focussing our attention and resources on the under 25s as homelessness is an issue across the lifespan and, with increasing immigration, not limited to the indigenous population (Devlin and McKenna, 2009).

This remainder of this article provide an overview of an initiative I have developed and sustained over the last 10 years in a transformational leadership (Tichy and Devanna, 1990) effort to galvanise the caring and related professions generally, and social work in particular, to take the issue of homelessness seriously in NI (and, hopefully beyond). This has led to creative and welcome opportunities to cross institutional divides and boundaries, working successfully with other passionate and committed people (in the academic, housing, homeless and caring service arenas), coupled with the deliberate involvement of current and former service users (Skelton, 2007, 2011; DSD, 2007; Housing Related Support Strategy, 2012-15; Francis Report, 2013) and, where possible, carers. And this has been quite a journey for all concerned; with a myriad of experiences and emotions: inspiration, encouragement, hope, frustration, obstacles, institutional obfuscation, isolation, and success in the face of ever mounting challenges!

Given that my social work and academic experience is within the NI context, the resulting focus of this article is therefore viewed through this prism, but hopefully the issues raised have a broader amplification and impact.

What I did and how I did it:

Homelessness is a significant social concern in NI: figures vary depending on the source, (Homeless Strategy, 2012-17; CHNI, 2015; Housing Rights, 2015), but Shelter NI (2016) estimated that 50+ families or individuals declare themselves homeless in NI daily! To compound this, given NIs disproportionate dependence on the public sector for employment and benefits (Fitzpatrick et al., 2014), homelessness is a likely threat in the face of current and foreseeable socioeconomic policies and reforms!

A decade of Gerry Skelton's Homelessness Awareness Panel and related events

In order to encourage social work students to understand the importance of homelessness as a core social work theme, task and concern, I began to raise this as part of my lecturing role and challenge some obvious prevailing assumptions. This was reinforced by the arrival of the BSc degree in social work (2004), which had homelessness named as a partial theme under the Criminal Justice teaching requirement (albeit a curriculum-perpetuating stereotype!). Nevertheless, this provided me with some licence to more obviously raise the profile of homelessness as a legitimate part of the social work curriculum. However, I was underwhelmed by the lack of collegiate and wider social work support to make this more of an embedded theme and set about trying to challenge this resistance more openly yet strategically. This culminated in having several frustrating conversations with key gate-keepers from 2005 and being asked 'What has homelessness got to do with social work'? Somewhat flabbergasted, I decided to turn this ignorant challenge into a galvanising determination; offering leadership (Covey, 1989; Northouse, 2009), and set about thinking through how best to tackle this apparent taboo issue. After a period of critical reflection (White et al., 2006) and checking out some ideas with practitioners and service users, I was felt suitably emboldened to create an educationally imaginative and ultimately effective (Narey, 2014) initiative that would appeal to students, service users and carers, social work practitioners, housing and homeless service providers.

In a parallel development, the Council for the Homeless NI (CHNI) decided to coordinate a Homeless Awareness Week (2006) and this culminated in the very first Homelessness Awareness Panel (**HAP**) Event in 2007 to support this initiative. It must be conceded that in my clarion call to encourage something of a re-envisioning (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014) and reclaiming of the social work role, I initially struggled to attract interest in this event and it demanded an inordinate amount of personal investment to ensure a calibre panel was in place and a reasonable sized audience was secured. Nevertheless, the event was a relative success, as measured by each panellist remarking on the uniqueness of the HAP event, and the positive speaker, audience and student feedback.

There has since been a Homelessness Awareness Panel event annually, and various themes (including homelessness in relation to adolescence, women, mental health, additions; 'Voices of homelessness', 'Homeless not hopeless'; and my concluding 2016 Belfast Met HAP event '***Joining the dots: prioritising homelessness as an explicit, fundamental concern for all***').

From the outset, I was transparent about what the HAP would endeavour to achieve and established a challenging agenda. This involved setting out 4 overarching assumptions that the HAP would seek to become more informed about and challenge accordingly, namely:

1) Homelessness is not taken seriously by the social work profession!
2) Social work has a lot to offer homelessness, and there are good practitioners and best practice examples;
3) The social work, housing / homelessness sector is a competitive rather than cooperative environment;
4) Homelessness is not inevitable and can be eradicated, especially for certain 'vulnerable groups'!

In addition to this, I defined (and refined) the purpose of the HAP as:

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1. To champion the theme of '***Giving homelessness a home***' in social work education, training and practice at all levels;
2. To inculcate and implicate homelessness as a fundamental concern for and of social workers (and related professions) in NI and beyond;
3. To challenge and eradicate the taboo of homelessness;
4. To provoke the social work, housing and homeless organisations (and related others, including the media. political, religious), agencies, groups and practitioners, etcetera. to cooperate in a meaningful and purposeful manner;
5. To highlight, promote, endorse and celebrate good practice examples and showcase good practitioners;
6. To touch the heads, hearts and spirits of the invited audience and encourage them to get involved in tackling homelessness (including asking 'What is our (individual and collective contribution to Homeless Awareness Week'?);
7. To provide a platform for those who have been or remain homeless: and have their voice meaningfully heard and validated; reminding them they are not alone;
8. To challenge service users to become more active in assuming responsibility to help themselves (and others) towards a better way;
9. To remind us all that caring matters and that we must '***Never lose the Care in the <u>Caring</u> services***'!

Rationale for this approach:

The HAP initiative has several unique facets, most notably:

- The audience were not told in advance who the Panellists were;
- The Panellists were not told in advance who their co-panellists were;
- The team helping me plan and run the event have always comprised students, current or former residents of homeless hostels, and occasionally some supportive colleagues.

The rationale behind my approach was part experience, part expediency and part pragmatism. My experience had taught me that often speakers come with their presentations tailored to the other panellists and some would accept or reject an invitation to the panel depending on who else was on it! Conversely, some may initially signal an intention to attend, simply to receive some favourable pre-publicity and then withdraw!

In terms of the team, the reality was I faced a lack of interest from colleagues in wanting to become involved (citing time restrictions and, not unreasonably, balking at the hours, days and weeks of pre-planning involved, including weekend and evening working!). The most enthusiastic response came from the various former / current service users from a homeless background and the students from social work and other caring courses I was teaching.

Links to literature on pedagogy and service user involvement:

The meaningful involvement of carers and service users is now more widely accepted (NISCC, 2003; Duffy, 2006; 2008; DSD, 2007; SCIE, 2009; Skelton, 2009; Wilson and Kelly, 2010) and embedded in social work education, training and practice; but not always meaningfully (Wilson and Kelly, 2010; Skelton, 2009, 2011; Webber and Robinson, 2011; Beresford and Carr, 2012 Francis Report, 2013).

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One of the most important aspects of the HAP and a feature which has helped anchor its ongoing integrity, has been the twofold inclusion of service users. Firstly, I made a commitment to involve people who had lived experience of what it is (or was) like to be homeless, and they had 3 opportunities to get involved: as an audience member (their anonymity assured); to be a member of my Homelessness Awareness Panel Volunteer Team (HAPVT); and / or to be a Panellist in their own right. One of the core commitments I made to myself in setting out on this journey was that every HAP would have 1-2 Panellists from a homeless background directly addressing the audience and at the end – when they had heard the professional voices and could comment accordingly.

Perhaps the significance and personal impact of such involvement is best encapsulated by Man Choi, who had been in the care of social services, fostered and subsequently experienced prolonged bouts of homeless. In his address to a homelessness symposium event in Queens' University (2014) he stated:

"Thanks to Gerry Skelton for realising my potential and encouraging me to become a 'champion' for homelessness since 2010. Without Gerry's passion, commitment and dedication I would not be sharing my experiences here today. Gerry has played a fundamental part in enabling me to turn my 'pain to gain', as he often says. I have experienced working with professionals where they 'get what they want out of you' and then there is no 'follow-up' or ongoing work. With Gerry, it's different. He doesn't just 'use you' for the work he is involved in, but he creates opportunities for people like me to develop skills and overcome the barriers we face. The door is always open … and Gerry ensures that the people he involves in his work are well looked after, resourced, protected and the work is REAL and MEANINGFUL!"

Grace Price has a history of homeless and, in the 2015 HAP event, concluded:

"*Today I'm not alone and my VOICE has been heard by Gerry and I'm hoping ALL of you here today. All of this matters, and is an important part of me having being Homeless but NOT hopeless*" (Price, 2015).

The second aspect is that students are equally entitled to participate in the support roles, including the HAPVT. They also were invited to volunteer for any publicity and a number have featured in the media coverage over the years. As the HAP event was for them, it did not seem reasonable to ask them to address it (although former students have now returned and done so, as one of the developments in the life of this initiative).

The HAP event has been consistently valued by the social work students, as several quotes attest:

 "The consideration that homelessness is singularly attributable to the homeless is oppressive and demands change. Social work is in a prime position to address the issues leading to and stemming from homelessness. The provision of this panel by Gerry Skelton demonstrates the necessary leadership which students must develop within practice. All Social Work students in the College would like to thank Gerry for arranging this event" (Brendan Campbell and Lindsay Nelson (2010: 3rd year social work student representatives).

"*Gerry's passion and enthusiasm for homeless awareness has impacted on us all as a class, making us all aware that homelessness is an issue that is often overlooked or not recognised enough by society and more importantly Social Work professionals. This has been evident in our SW Education. Despite homelessness being prevalent across the social work spectrum, homelessness is not formally included in our teaching. I know one of the hopes for the Homeless awareness panel event was to make final year student social workers aware "that in six months' time - when they (we) are qualified practitioners - homelessness is not something that they will be able to gloss over or relegated to something that Gerry Skelton said in class." (Skelton, 2010, SWAP). We have all been challenged to take homelessness more seriously now and after our learning at BMC in complete*" (Stephen Johnston, 2012, 3rd year social work Student Representative).

"*This (HAP, 2013) event enabled me to realise the courage service users had to take the audience through their personal journey to ultimately raise this issue. Therefore, if we have such dedication from service users, then the least we can do…is to address and raise awareness of this (homelessness) issue*" (Jonathan Dillon, 2013 2nd year social work Student Representative).

What has been learnt from this approach?

There has been a lot of learning emanating from this HAP event, which predates its inception. From the outset, I was keen to transform my frustration regarding the apparent relegation of homelessness in social work education to, at best, a peripheral and often neglected sub-theme; with little in the way of institutional or collegiate support.

Having encountered some resistance in attempting to champion the theme of homelessness, I realised that I needed to learn from this in terms of effective leadership (Covey, 1989; Northouse, 2009) and turn my 'pain to gain': transforming my negative experience into a positive, galvanising energy that sought to make a constructive difference. Interestingly, this was something of a parallel for some who had experienced homelessness, sharing how they had often felt ignored by social work and related services. For some, this contributed to their sense of 'worth-lessness', while a smaller number became determined to turn their life situation around; finding support from non-social work services.

Following on from this, I have been gratified and humbled by the amount of current and former service users (and some students) wanting to get involved in helping me raise and challenge the spectre of homelessness; again, using their pain to motivate and feed their resilience (Wolin and Wolin, 1993; Walsh, 1996; Regehr et al., 2001) by assisting others see the plight of homelessness and encouraging people to get involved. This is particularly striking when service users share their personal and deeply impacting story of being homelessness and the struggles they experienced; including how professionals either became involved meaningfully to assist them or failed to take an interest, beyond tokenism.

This level of involvement is matched, at least in part, by the alacrity with which successive cohorts of students have volunteered to help, culminating in the Homelessness Awareness Panel Volunteer Team (HAPVT) that I assemble to help me with each HAP event. The learning they take from their involvement complements

and enhances their experience of the HAP itself, especially as they get access to all the speakers before and after the event. This obviously adds an additional layer of embedded learning and makes a deeper personal impact. Indeed, a number of these volunteers have gone on to seek work in the homeless sector: either in a volunteering or professional social care / social work capacity.

One of the most important pieces of learning was ensuring the HAP's authenticity was maintained, regardless of any pressures experienced / exerted. As the HAP event has become more established and correspondingly successful, there is always subtle pressure to name in advance the panel speakers, which has to be resisted. The vast majority of speakers and attendees highly commend this unknown and richly anticipated core aspect of the event, and leads to a more honest series of presentations and resultant engagement. The audience can access the various presentations after the event and follow up with the respective speakers (including current / former service users, if agreeable).

What are the strengths of my approach to addressing homelessness?

"Influence is the sine qua non of leadership" (Northouse, 2001: 3)

In terms of the strengths of this approach to addressing homelessness, these can be encapsulated as:

1. Mindful of Narey's (2014) critique of social work academics' predilection towards their own areas of interest at the exclusion of more pragmatic social work concerns, I ensured that homelessness was not an academic interest; but rooted in a genuine concern for what students will realistically encounter in their placements and subsequent professional practice. This, in turn, also incorporated the NI Department of Employment and Learning (DELNI) increased emphasis on lecturers creating relevant and excellent learning experiences for students, and contributed to 'making the education of social workers consistently effective' (Narey, 2014).

2. The more recent government efforts have been focused on homelessness prevention (Homeless Strategy, 2012-17; 2017-22) and the HAP has always had this as part of its overriding concern and activity.

3. Homelessness in social work has been placed back on the social work agenda, with an attendant raising of its profile to such an extent that, in 2013, Gerry Skelton was shortlisted for a NI social work award in recognition of his work promoting the theme of homelessness in social work. Furthermore, and arguably building on this professional recognition, in 2014 the Health and Social Care Board formally announced (at the 2014 homelessness symposium Event!) that homelessness would become one of 3 major, explicit and cross-cutting themes in the revised social work degree, commencing in 2016.

> **"Having somewhere to call home is a fundamental right and need, and the holding of this (2014 homelessness symposium) event and the championing on this issue by Gerry Skelton serves well to remind us of what we need to do"** (Tony Rogers, Assistant Director, NI Health and Social Care Board, 2014).

This is clear evidence of meaningful leadership (Covey, 1989; Northouse, 2009) and progress: albeit long overdue but still so welcome. This was further reinforced and professionally consolidated by the humble and generous admission from the Chief Social Worker, Sean Holland, who candidly conceded in an interview (www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z14d3NdrX9Q):

"*I have to agree…social work hasn't been taking homelessness seriously and I have to take some responsibility for that*" (Holland, 2016).

4. The obvious widening not only of the student social work knowledge base (Trevithick, 2008) but their understanding of this issue and its constituent parts; and resulting development of various degrees of compassion and empathy;

5. The time I spend in advance of the HAP Event (and subsequently) building the confidence of service users and developing their speaking skills. This often results in a more assured and powerful service user contribution and personal development. This is captured in the following 2015 reflection by Man Choi.

"**Gerry's HAP Event still brings back very positive memories, and has made a positive difference to my life (and) from meeting Gerry for the first time, I soon realised that he wasn't doing this because it was his job, but because he cared passionately about the issue of homelessness.**
At first, I was really nervous about sharing my personal story to a packed audience…but I was soon put at ease, through Gerry's positivity, his dedication to making the audience aware of the sensitivity of the service user contribution, and through his openness, non-judgemental manner and integrity. Here was a man who was determined and committed to having homelessness taken seriously, and for allowing service users to have a platform to share their own unique and individual experiences.
I initially thought that after I had shared my story that this would be the end. That there would be no follow-up or ongoing work. I was accustomed to being introduced to professionals for a short while, do what was expected and that would be it. But this has not been the case where Gerry is concerned. I have actually become a celebrity in the making [well sort of] by appearing on the SWAP website who subsequently supported the 2010 HAP Event and identified Gerry's work as work of excellence [truly deserved, in my personal opinion}. I am now technically working in the field where young people are 'homeless'. I am thankful that I have gained the confidence, enthusiasm, opportunity, and knowledge that I can now pass on and use the skills I have gained to help other young people who are going through similar circumstances I've had to face. I think that this proves, that no matter what life throws at you, no matter what background or situation you are faced with, no matter how negative life may seem, that positive differences can be made. You just need to have the right people involved, the right support in place and a commitment and determination to wanting to and being willing to succeed".

6. Extending the invitation to students and invited guest beyond the social work field has been refreshing and strategic. The HAP Event now has a mixed

audience each year, drawn from the broad social care / work professions, alongside health, media, and so on;

7. The obvious involvement of current and past service users, students and a plethora of professionals (social work, NI Housing Executive, Homeless providers and charities, journalists, etcetera);

8. While I had a modest level of support initially from the college I work for, Belfast Met, I had hoped to strategically secure the interest of the wider helping professions, culminating in their support and sponsorship of the annual HAP Event. This has been achieved and has become an obvious form of professional endorsement in and of the work. The Social Work and Social Policy Higher Education Academy was the first external sponsor (2010) and commended the HAP as a piece of excellence in the UK. It has subsequently been supported and praised by key stakeholders (including the NI Social Care Council, 2011; Patient and Client Council, 2012, Simon Community, 2013; Oaklee /Trinity Housing Association; Extern, 2015; and Rea Estates agency in 2016).

   "**Some of the experiences shared at the event were hard hitting showing the work that still needs to be done to address the specific health and social care issues of (people who are) homeless. I want to commend the work of Gerry Skelton**"(Richard Dixon, PCC Manager, 2012 HAP).

9. Getting students to engage with their motivation for becoming a social worker (Cree, 2003) and how the theme of homelessness helped contextualise much of their core teaching, learning and self-reflection (Schon, 1991; Fook, 2002; White et al., 2006; Thompson and Thompson, 2008) in relation to values, principles and ethics (Skelton, 2010; Akhtar, 2012); human rights; and theories of attachment, loss, transition (Trevithick, 2008; Walker and Crawford, 2010), etcetera.

What could be done differently?

It is always interesting to reflect (Schon, 1991; Fook, 1996 & 2002; White et al, 2006; Thompson and Thompson, 2008) and think what could be done better or just differently in the light of running the HAP Events these last 10 years. Several suggestions are duly proffered:

1. The issue of how to pay service users / carers for their involvement is still a vexed and, in many ways unjust situation, especially if they are on any type of benefit which is immediately impacted (Turner and Beresford, 2005; Skelton, 2009)! Obviously the professionals are remunerated from their time and efforts, as it is often part of their job, mine included. Therefore, one has to be correspondingly creative in seeking meaningful ways to compensate the willing service users and to ensure there is no exploitation!

2. If institutional time and funding was provided, a training course could be developed to increase capacity and ability of potential service users (and carers, where appropriate) to equip them to address various audiences more confidently and competently. After all, this is what many professional have received and could reduce the time demands on the HAP Director greatly! Furthermore, it would be helpful to have previous users of homeless service as peer trainers and mentors to subsequent speakers; enabling the former to have a valued role and rewarding contribution to make and be paid for;

3. Increasing the capacity of the HAP Event. This has already begun, with Gerry Skelton invited to run a successful HAP Event at Queens University in 2014, by its Director of social work, Dr. John Devaney (MBE), and to address social policy and homelessness on an annual basis;

4. Widening the reach of the HAP initiative across NI / UK and exploring international connections with potential partner institutions.

Discussion:

There are several key themes to emerge from this initiative and associated practice implications, namely:

1. Reclaiming homelessness as a legitimate social work concern;
2. Grounding social work teaching;
3. Meaningful service user (and, where appropriate, Carer) involvement;
4. Social responsibility.

1. Reclaiming homelessness as a legitimate social work concern:

"***One of life's basic needs, like food and water, is shelter. The provision of housing and associated services extends across virtually all of social work's various arenas of endeavour, from providing foster care to neglected or abused children, to finding homes for persons leaving treatment facilities, to helping refugees find their "place" in a new country, to addressing homelessness itself***" (Social Work Policy Institute, 2006).

One of the fundamental aspirations of this initiative and recurring refrains from the professionals participating in the HAP event (as speakers or attendees), has been the appreciation that homelessness should rightly be recognised as a legitimate social work concern. Students require an extensive knowledge base for social work (Trevithick, 2008) and 'Supporting People' (2003) is not merely the preserve of the NI Housing Executive but a primary social work purpose and activity!

An early challenge in the establishment, development and evolution of the HAP, was to get the social work profession to see it as a real social work issue (SWPI, 2006; Skelton, 2011). This was manifested in several ways including many querying why they should be involved in a homeless event; not seeing the relevance to social work and challenging its inclusion in the social work curriculum. Indeed, it was initially difficult getting social work managers and practitioners to appear as Panellists. So it was pivotal to secure the NI Social Care Council's sponsorship of the 2011 HAP event, which was subsequently reported in their literature as a successful and important collaboration (NISCC, 2012). The following year, the Patient Client Council sponsored the event, again highlighting the importance of this as a social care / social work and health theme (2012). Indeed, both made a commitment to promote homelessness awareness among their respective constituencies; the former profiling one of the HAP former service users and HAP panellist, Man Choi (2013); and the latter producing a report on 'Issues faced by people who are homeless in NI' (2015).

Moreover, students have reported that when they raised homelessness as a theme on placement, they were often encouraged to see this not as a social work concern but more of a housing issue. Indeed, this is often replicated within the housing and homelessness provider perspectives. This finds resonance in the findings of Wilson

and Kelly (2010) who noted a recurring disjunction between the academic and placement learning environments, experiences and expectations.

Interestingly, there is very little mention of homelessness in the Social Work strategy (2012-22), or correspondingly, social work in the Homeless Strategy (2012-2017), nor Transforming (or what I increasingly refer to it as 'transferring') Your Care (2011): despite the somewhat ironic 'Home is the hub'! To this end, I have successfully lobbied the respective commissioners, regulators and universities to correct this misapprehension and, although it has taken a number of years and effort hours, the HAP has managed to impact and necessitate a change of curriculum direction: homelessness will be a specific cross-cutting theme in social work education from 2017 (disappointingly at year 3 level only!). Nevertheless, this represents progress of sorts and one is hopeful of a more obvious inclusion of homelessness as a discrete theme from the foundation year of social work education (as I continue to champion at Belfast Met), and building upon that in subsequent years.

One of the more notable achievements of the HAP was the moving of the discussion (and transforming of the discourse) from 'the homeless' or 'homeless people' to the '***person who is homeless***': centralising the person as our primary concern. This compelled me to introduce 'labelisation' {www.youtube.com/watch?v=bV9CqZr8xXU}: namely the process of placing a stigmatised label before a person and addressing or stereotyping them accordingly: often dehumanising people as a result.

There has been some more recent attention afforded to homelessness, particularly regarding adolescents as a result of the Southwark ruling (2009) and subsequent application to NI through the Judge Tracey ruling (2012). This has been strengthened by additional strategies and policies, including the Health and Social Care Board's Commissioning plan (regarding suitable accommodation, re-evaluating intervention models and emphasising prevention, etcetera), the Department of Education and Learning's 'Steps to success' and Community family support programme, and the NIHE Homelessness strategy (2012-2017 & 2017-22); Housing related support strategy (2012-2015); Housing Strategy for NI, 2015; and Promoting Social Inclusion. It is to be hoped that these and the 2017-2022 Homeless Strategy will offer a more integrated and successful approach to tackling homelessness: and really mean 'ending it together'.

2. Grounding social work teaching:
"*The myriad issues confronting the Social Work, Social Care, Health and related professions generally, and practitioners specifically, can be readily viewed through the prism of homelessness. Indeed, arguably homelessness is not simply a practical reality but goes to the very core of one's physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual identity, and resultant self-esteem*"(Skelton, 2011).

There is little point in offering social work students education that does not relate to many of the arenas they will encounter, including hard to reach groups (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014); and arguably homelessness is one of the biggest factors impacting much of the social work arena. Having a safe place to call home is a basic citizen right, regardless if you are a welfare recipient or not (SWPI, 2006; Devlin and McKenna, 2009; Law Centre (NI), 2015; Housing Rights, 2015). Whether this is in the family and childcare sphere, where children / adolescents require a home in

fostering or residential care, or moving out of the care system – some to a homeless hostel. Or an adult / elder, unable to cope due to a plethora of challenges (unemployment, relationship breakdown, domestic abuse, and so on) or a refugee / asylum seeker and ending up being homeless (SWP!, 2006; Homeless Strategy, 2012-17; Skelton, 2016).

Furthermore, inculcating a felt sense for and of service users' experiences is an important facet of social work teaching and resulting learning. This is also an important reminder that social work demands a mixture of intelligence: intellectual, emotional (Goleman, 1996; 2006), spiritual (Zohar and Marshall, 2001; Alexander, 2003) and so on; in order to develop the practitioner's ability and extend their capacity to meaningfully embrace and compassionately engage with those caught up in the homelessness plight.

In addition, we must make social policy more directly relevant in our teaching, extracting the social work practice implications more specifically. For example, the application of the Personal and Public Involvement (PPI) policy (2007) and equipping students and future practitioners to take this seriously and understand the anti-oppressive practice imperatives involved.

The HAP also gives content and foundation to many of the often highlighted but, to many students, seemingly abstract socioeconomic policies such as the Supporting People Programme (2003), Transforming Your Care (2011), Welfare Reform (2011; 2015); concepts such as poverty, disadvantage, universal credit; and core social work values (respect, acceptance); principles (including integrity, dignity, empowerment, inclusion, privacy), ethics (including justice), and essential practice exhortations (including meaningful carer / service user involvement).

For example, teaching can use homelessness as a prism through which to examine the Welfare Reform (2011; 2015) agenda, with its inexorably increased credit-crunch (Fitzpatrick et al., 2014; NIPSA, 2015) and resultant cuts to frontline social work / care, health, housing, and homelessness budgets. This, in turn, will create an increased demand for more affordable social rather than private housing but the NI Housing Executive is, in reality, a landlord rather than a housing provider. This role is now the preserve of housing associations who need to see homelessness as part of their raison d'être and target some of their increasing resources to this end. Also, the threatened 'bedroom tax' (albeit abated for the moment in NI), is a reminder that social housing is still needed and the NI budget has to be prioritised accordingly!

Nevertheless, it is also incumbent upon those who have been or are homeless to embrace the principles of self-determination and learned helpfulness; assisting themselves out of homelessness and remaining so. Regrettably, it has to be recognised that, despite many attempts to persuade them otherwise, some people may choose to become and remain homeless.

Interestingly, as an extension to this teaching and learning example, other issues can be subsumed and / or extracted. For example, there is a ready supply of houses in NI, but, due to the ongoing legacy of sectarianism and its impact on service provision and allocation (Hamilton et al., 2008), and unfortunate segregated division of housing, there remains a large swathe of boarded up (albeit readily available) houses, but few

willing to take these allocations up. This, in the face of the current and anticipated economic difficulties NI faces (including increased homelessness), is a clearly unsustainable and unacceptable scenario, and must be addressed as a matter of urgency; thus increasing the capacity and subsequent availability of social housing.

The HAP event always ensures there is good social work representation on the Panel, as it is important that the majority social work and care audience hears from the practitioners who are delivering a social work service in the homelessness arena. This is complemented and further extended to ensure "…inter-professional learning" (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014: 44) by speakers from housing, homelessness and associated bodies; ranging from policy, commissioners, managerial and service providers, coupled with direct service user inputs (Francis Report, 2013). There is also a question and answer session at the end of the speaker's inputs and this is open to the floor; leading to some lively discussions.

Moreover, various organisations are able to bring 'pop-up' stands, advertising their services and attendees have an opportunity to engage with them before and after the HAP event. In addition (and time allowing), an opportunity is given to several of these agencies to provide a brief overview of their service and how people can get involved; and this provides an amplification affect as well as a bit of profile for individuals or groups needing some PR (especially housing organisations and homelessness charities, self-harm, suicide, addiction prevention projects, service user / carer support and advocacy groups, fostering, after care services, clergy, counselling services, etcetera).

The HAP event also enables and, I argue, ennobles the integration of a community development approach that is often missing or poorly represented in social work education, training and practice (Heenan, 2004; Das et al., 2015). Thus the concluding facet of grounding this teaching has previously included taking students to visit a homelessness hostel in semester 2. This provided a more intimate experience (with the student group divided in two and goings on alternative weeks). The reality of crossing the threshold of a homeless hostel lives long in the student memory and it is helped by having experienced the HAP event initially. Indeed, a number of students choose to address homelessness as a theme for a subsequent Semester 2 module assignment; further reinforcing its place in the student as well as social work agenda.

3. Meaningful service user (and, where appropriate, Carer) involvement:
It is a Skelton (2011) contention that service user involvement is still overly tokenistic and not sufficiently meaningful; historically (Beresford and Croft, 2004; Duffy, 2006) and contemporaneously (Webber and Robinson, 2011; Beresford and Carr, 2012; Francis Report, 2013; and echoed by Croisdale-Appleby, 2014)! I readily acknowledge the progress made in more recent years, but the ignorance of many professionals to the existence (never mind practice exhortations) of the Personal and Public Involvement (PPI) policy (2007) and underpinning legislative basis (2003; 2009) is all too apparent! This was, I believe (at least in part), the reason for Dr Jim Livingston (DHSSPSNI, 2012) having to issue an important circular to the heads of all health and social work / care directorates reminding them of the need to embed PPI in and across their organisations, services and staff. But there is often quite a disparity between aspiring to and actually achieving real involvement of current and former service users and carers. This cannot be fully explained as a social work reluctance

(although I believe this does exist), but also requires an appreciation of the complexities involved. As already mentioned, the difficulty of securing and delivering payment to those on benefits is often problematic though not insurmountable (SCIE, 2016). In addition, there is quite a time commitment required and necessary balance to be struck between needing to properly prepare participants but also not coaching them! They need to be freed to speak their truth, but responsibly; and assisted in doing this as safely as possible. Indeed, in this I and all the service users I have worked are at one: we both have a heartfelt desire that they do their very best and are proud of their contribution – their appearance and presentation has to be of benefit to them as well as the audience! To this end, I always ensured the HAP experience is affirming and meaningful for all those presenting and attending: as the abundance of positive audience feedback readily attests {www.youtube.com/watch?v=KA3Cdw4usMM}.

The HAP attempts to model meaningful service user and, where appropriate, carer involvement; resonating with 3 of the 4 'Involvement Models' (Consultation. Partnership and Political) highlighted by Webber and Robinson (2011). So what does service user involvement look like in this initiative? Well, it is tiered as follows. Initially, I approach a range of service users (past and present) and invite them to get involved, either as part of the HAPVTeam, Panellist, or both! This will also be influenced by the HAP theme for the event. I always ensure there are at least 2 service users as Panellists.

Furthermore, an invitation goes out to a host of homeless providers, with a follow-up telephone call from me, encouraging them to ensure their representation at the event includes a mix of staff and residents. Therefore, the audience is peppered with a diversity of backgrounds and experiences; enriching the experience of attendees individually and collectively.

I referred earlier to the centrality of PPI and this is manifested in the involvement of service users (DSD, 2007) in the small planning group I gather: a mix of previous speakers and service users. The group helps shape the theme, identifies potential speakers, supports my efforts in recruiting a good representation of service users, professionals, etcetera to make up a more informed and interesting audience. This is also used to increase the capacity of service users in an effort to build and sustain their confidence, competence; and contributes to their improved life choices, learned helpfulness, optimism (Seligman, 1990) and hopefully long-term 'housingness' rather than 'homelessness'. This is something that is often understated but deeply appreciated by many of the service users (Price, 2016; Forrestal, 2016), and service providers: past and present (www.youtube.com/watch?v=2EIib6rJ730).

One of the added value aspects is that service users get to come into Belfast Met (many for the first time) and get to see a learning environment from a different aspect. While the College does have a policy to reach out to those disadvantaged by their life circumstances, including those from a care background who are often underrepresented in further and higher education (Access all Areas report, 2012; Access to Success strategy, 2012; Department for Education and Learning, 2012; Jackson and Cameron, 2014; Fostering Network, 2015; Ulster University, 2015; DHSSPSNI, 2016; OFFA, 2016), it is important to note that the HAP is not a surreptitious attempt at recruitment! Many but not all had / have left secondary education early and some with little in the way of academic qualifications. I have

been interested in colleagues from the homeless hostels feedback about how service users have gone back encouraged, seeing academia with less resistant eyes and even encouraging other residents to continue or take up education. Several ex-Panellists have also returned to education, which is encouraging.

This meaningful involvement of service users also signals to the social work students in particular, how service users are valued for their contribution to the event as well as participation in it. Where possible (and with the providers permission), these same service users are subsequently invited to join in the visit to the homeless hostel in Semester 2 and contribute to the visit and emerging discussion. This added value facet has proved very important to them as their feedback attests and, equally importantly, they and the students value this less public and somewhat more intimate exchange.

Finally, and echoing the finding of others in social work education (Nuttall and Jackson, 1994; Gore and Black, 2009), I am sensitive to the fact that, in any given social work course, there is bound to be a smattering of care-experienced students and the HAP sends out a powerful message that all service user experiences are valued and make a meaningful contribution to their social work teaching and learning. The respectful, dignified and non-judgemental way service users are included and supported can only help convey this message, especially my insistence on seeing the person first and holistically: not simply their title of service user (past / present). It may also help provide an additional layer of appreciation for their own efforts in successfully securing a place in FE/HE; something that is a real achievement given the vicissitudes of life obstacles they may well have had to overcome, as many tend to be unsuccessful in education (Department for Education and Learning, 2012; Stein, 2012; Jackson and Cameron, 2014; OFFA, 2016). Additionally, it acts as an encouragement to those who report experiencing the taboo associated with being a service user generally and more specifically homeless. They get to impart their wisdom on a social work course with a hope of improving service provision in light of their experiences. Indeed, I am convinced that the wounded healer (Nouwen, 1972; Regehr et al., 2001) has much to offer and can provide an important riposte to a more academic, functionalist, technocratic social work approach.

4. Social responsibility:

"*As a social worker…I am delighted to have the opportunity to participate in Gerry Skelton's Homeless Awareness Panel. Developing an increased awareness of the issue of homelessness is an important step towards a just and inclusive society*" (Potter, 2008).

One of the hopes for the HAP initiative was to inculcate a sense of social responsibility and promoting inclusion (DSD, 2007), not only within a College and wider educational context (DELNI: 2012; 2015) but also widening this to include other professions in addressing homelessness. For example, one of the challenges facing homelessness is how it is reported and the HAP event has had student and professional journalists as part of the audience and, more recently, as speakers.

"*The journalism students were left in no doubt as to the seriousness of homelessness and how the media should approach the concept in a more balanced manner, both in terms of how to write about the subject, but also in relation to their*

interview and presentation techniques with people who have suffered, or are suffering, from the challenge of being homeless. Gerry Skelton's HAP was an 'eye opener' for many students as to the challenges which the homeless face, and plays an invaluable role in helping the future generation of journalists understand the meaning of the phrase to be human. Of particular importance and impact was the role of Gerry Skelton and his 'hands-on' experience and expertise in dealing with the challenges of homelessness. He also made an excellent interviewee for the journalists, given his understanding of how the media works and communicated the key messages and issues surrounding the concept of homelessness" (Coulter, 2015).

It was also important to get my employers involved in this event, initially ensuring its longer term survival but equally establishing it as a wider College rather than just social work event. This has been achieved by eventually securing the generous involvement of the College Principal and Chief Executive just shortly after her appointment, the Deputy Director, in his 1st months with the College and more recently the Chief Operating Officer. This high level Directorate support has been so helpful not only as an endorsement of the HAP itself, but in amplifying its success and increasing reach throughout the College, and reflecting this more broadly and externally, in line with DELNI's (2015) requirement for increased social inclusion, curriculum relevance, embedding quality teaching, and promoting the FE sector. In turn, each has commented in their Panel presentations and evaluative feedback, that the HAP event has had a big impact on them personally and professionally; bringing the reality of homelessness much more vividly and meaningfully to their consciousness and practice {www.youtube.com/watch?v=KA3Cdw4usMM}.

Securing support through a form of sponsorship has been a really important development in further encouraging a cascading of social responsibility. As previously noted, the HAP successfully secured social work and related organisations as sponsors (SWAP, NISCC, PCC), but it has more recently engaged the support of housing and homeless providers. For example, one of the leading charities, the NI Simon Community supported the 2013 event and, in 2014, by the then largest housing association in NI, Oaklee/Trinity. Both reported their delight at having this opportunity and this was complemented by an additional and very first HAP event being hosted at Queen's University, Belfast in 2014. The sponsorship of Extern, a leading voluntary organisation was a significant milestone, as was the 2016 collaboration with Rea Estates: a private sector company. This cross sector collaboration (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014; DELNI, 2015) is an essential part of embedding homelessness as a fundamental concern for all. Consequently, I was delighted to have played my small part in the development of Extern Homes, and look forward to more courageous and resourceful cross sector partnership working.

Finally, the HAP experience can also serve to remind practitioners and students of the importance of revisiting their own childhood / adolescent / adult experiences (Cree, 2003): it is not uncommon for a number of attendees to discretely approach me after an event to share their personal experiences of being homeless and appreciation for the highlighting of this broad but personally and collectively impacting theme.

Conclusion:

Homelessness is an increasing problem in NI, in line with the picture in the rest of GB (Fitzpatrick et al., 2014; Shelter, 2016). The nature of homelessness is ever-changing, and we all need to play our part (personally as well as professionally) in meaningfully seeking to end, prevent or at least reduce homelessness (Homeless Strategy, 2017-22).

Croisdale-Appleby (2014) highlighted a number of pertinent issues in his review of social work education that find resonance in the HAP event initiative. These included calling for increased efforts to engage with hard to reach groups; and those who have been or currently are homeless are certainly one of these (Housing Related Support Strategy, 2012-15)! He also advocates the inclusion of social work stakeholders including commissioners, current and former students, carers and service users; and, along with others (Francis Report, 2013), emphasises the importance of greater involvement of service users in the designing and shaping of the chosen curriculum. Finally, he calls for a greater readiness to be inculcated within student practitioners to facilitate their entry into the social work profession.

On a personal note, I am grateful for the encouragement of a range of people who have sustained me in championing this important human rights issue, and, I contend, a fundamental social work concern. On occasion, I have been disappointed by the apparent lack of engagement from social work colleagues across the various professional spheres in relation to a basic appreciation of how homeless and social work are inextricably linked and, as the annual Homelessness Awareness Panel event comes round, I almost have to start at the beginning; explaining its rationale! This is indicative of how much work still needs to be done and hopefully social work's commitment to addressing homelessness explicitly as one of 3 cross-cutting themes is encouraging: but relegating this to a year 3 and not a primary year 1 theme is a concern! Social work is a skilful activity (Trevithick, 2008) and demands the necessary training which signals what the profession values, prioritises, and what it does not! And students inevitably absorb this signal and core message, and act upon it accordingly! Nevertheless, I am encouraged by Sean Holland's (2016) deeply touching words (and interview: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z14d3NdrX9Q); upon which I base my hope that change is here and homelessness will be rightly afforded its place as a legitimate social work priority for educators, practitioners, trainers and students alike}:

> "*People need to take this issue (of homelessness) seriously… and so you have my gratitude and admiration for the work you do in raising its profile…thank you, Gerry*".

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