



The Training and Guidance Units (TAG)

(The views of 131 people on the benefits users of mental health services get from using the TAG Units in Highland)

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WHAT IS HUG?

HUG stands for the Highland Users Group, which is a network of people who use, or have used, mental health services in the Highlands.

At present, HUG has 349 members and 14 branches across the Highlands. HUG has been in existence now for 11 years.

HUG wants people with mental health problems to live without discrimination and to be equal partners in their communities. They should be respected for their diversity and who they are.

We should:

- ◆ Be proud of who we are
- ◆ Be valued
- ◆ Not be feared
- ◆ Live lives free from harassment
- ◆ Live the lives we choose
- ◆ Be accepted by friends and loved ones
- ◆ Not be ashamed of what we have experienced

We hope to achieve this by:

- ◆ Speaking out about the services we need and the lives we want to lead.
- ◆ Educating the public, professionals and young people about our lives and experiences.

Between them, members of HUG have experience of nearly all the mental health services in the Highlands.

HUG's aims are as follows:

- To be the voice of people in Highland who have experienced mental health problems.
- To promote the interests of people in Highland who use or have used mental health services.
- To eliminate stigma and discrimination against people with mental health problems.
- To promote equality of opportunity for people with mental health problems irrespective of creed, sexuality, gender, race or disability.
- To improve understanding about the lives of people with a mental health problem.
- To participate in the planning development and management of services for users at a local, Highland and national level.
- To identify gaps in services and to campaign to have them filled.
- To find ways of improving the lives, services and treatments of people with mental health problems.
- To share information and news on mental health issues among mental health service user groups and interested parties.
- To increase knowledge about resources, treatments and rights for users.
- To promote cooperation between agencies concerned with mental health.

Introduction

In March 2007 two of the HUG workers went to the first of our 2 monthly series of branch meetings to meet with our members and hold a discussion on peer support - a subject that our committee (The HUG Round Table) had decided would be useful when setting the topics for our branch meetings for the forthcoming year.

Our first meeting was scheduled to be held in the Training and Guidance Unit (TAG) in Alness. When we arrived we found nearly 20 people waiting for us when we had been expecting four or five.

We quickly found out the reason. Around half the people were connected with TAG and dismayed that they had been told that there was no guarantee about accessing future funding for the unit and that this year in particular could prove to be critical. They had been told that there was a real likelihood that a substantial part of the service could be lost if new sources of funding could not be tapped into.

The rest of the people had come to the meeting because the Drop In Centre that they use was in a similar position with its funding, to the extent that it has had to cut its service.

The room was so crowded that people had to sit on the floor and on desks but we quickly managed to sort ourselves out and changed the topic so that this round of meetings was about the TAG Units and the Drop In services which both cover the Highlands.

We held a total of 15 meetings across the Highlands and involved the greatest number of people so far in our network – 131 people which may indicate how important this issue is to our members.

As usual we held discussions based around a few key 'prompt' questions. We made notes at each meeting and then they were written up into this report which was then ratified by the HUG Round Table.

This report is not a formal evaluation of TAG - instead it is a way of expressing how it has helped a substantial number of people over the years. We were very clear that we were seeking the positives and although we make suggestions for improvements did not seek the views of those who may have felt that they didn't benefit from it. It is part of a campaign by HUG members and TAG clients to secure a sustainable future for a service which is valued by many people. We will be issuing a similar report about the Drop In services soon.

What is TAG?

TAG is a service that aims to improve the skills, confidence and motivation of people who have experienced mental ill health to the point where they can get back into employment.

For many people with a mental illness, employment is a distant and unlikely prospect but they may have a huge desire to find activity and occupation which can, for some, be just as important as paid work.

TAG, by providing a safe space and a variety of activities (ranging from creative writing, arts and crafts, computer and office based technology, college courses, supported work and voluntary work placements and a variety of other activities) seeks to give its clients the self belief and new skills which will help them to feel able and willing to re-engage with mainstream communities again.

It has Units in: Inverness, East Ross, East Sutherland, Thurso, Wick, Skye & Lochalsh and Aviemore.

The main problems it faces:

- **Funding** – TAG is funded from a variety of sources but its key source of funding is from the European Social Fund which accounts for over 40% of its income. When we were told about TAG's position in March we were told that there were new criteria to this fund which might not fit with TAG's needs. We were given the strong impression that services were likely to be cut and workers made redundant. The situation is not quite as bad as that now but the fact remains that a service that has over 245 clients over the year and employs the full-time equivalent of 14 workers does have to apply for funds from year to year which creates uncertainty for workers and clients alike.
- **The Premises** – many of the TAG premises are cramped or shared and some appear quite institutional. This particularly applies to its main Inverness base. The building is an old hospital ward on the old Craig Dunain hospital site. Despite the affection that TAG clients hold for it, there is agreement that it is an outdated and uncomfortable place to work. For many years health service managers have known that the Unit would have to move when Craig Dunain was re-developed. This situation is critical at the moment with TAG trying to continue its work in what is now really a huge building site.

(Since we held these meetings TAG has found new smaller temporary premises nearby)

- **The Aims** – whilst TAG's main aim is to help people back into work, staff and users alike are aware that the road to work is long and varied. It is not a simple matter of regaining skills or job interview abilities, it is about regaining confidence and self belief whilst at the same time dealing with the pressures that mental illness can impose. This journey and the ways people approach it may not sit easily with the sort of hard targets (such as jobs gained) that are used to measure the success of a service such as this. It may be more helpful if other measurements of the quality of service could be added when negotiating with funders.

The views of TAG clients

The clients of TAG were full of praise for the service and very clear in their minds that it was much much more than an employment or training service, although that is an important element to it, as is described below.

What people gain from attending TAG

For many trainees TAG helps people gain skills, qualifications, re-enter education and obtain work:

"It was very useful as it gives education and things to do."

"It sets you up for college and helps you get jobs in the community."

"I used a computer and researched things and had outings."

But not everyone is as clear about this as others. For some people the simple statement of:

"It helped a lot" or "it was really good" or "I just enjoyed it" is enough to bear witness to its value.

It is a place where people can begin again and find something to look forward to and provides opportunities to find tangible benefits along the way.

"It's the only place where I know you can go and start again if you haven't done well at school and need support to start again."

"It led me into study; it gave me the confidence to do it."

"I couldn't work but I could do voluntary work [now]."

"It gives you a reason to get up in the morning."

"Its 5 years since I worked but the stuff I do here gives hope of employment. TAG is a stepping stone to it."

"It's getting you back into real work."

But quite apart from hard outcomes such as qualifications and employment, TAG helps people with their own well-being and outlook which are all part and parcel of the road people travel towards recovery.

"The outcome is confidence, self- esteem, support and self- motivation."

"When I first came here I was really withdrawn. Coming here slowly helped me open up."

" Everyone helps each other out. One day it may help me back into the outside world. It helps with training and hopefully one day into a job."

"People do work in different ways, nearly everyone moves on in one way or another."

"Being alive at the end of the year is a success story."

"We do recover and here helps with that."

Activity

TAG provides a safe space to help people find occupation again. Many people come from a very isolated home environment with little to do and little motivation to become active.

TAG gives people a purpose and a reason to do things. It gives people something to look forward to and a structure to the week. These small steps can be crucial leaps when people are trying to regain the confidence to re-engage with mainstream society.

"It was fine; it gave you something to get up for when you didn't want to get up."

"When I went I gained a lot, it got me out of the house. I did courses for 2 years. I would like to do it again."

"I like the craft days; it reminds me of primary school; a warm feeling. They bring in people who can teach and show techniques. Something about the personal task of making something for someone. Everyone working at the same table chatting and getting to know one another more."

"The activities are really good, you get to go and see things and do things you wouldn't ordinarily do."

"There's a variety of activities here which makes it a positive week. There can be photography, reading groups, getting used to the office environment. The time I spend away from here, there is nothing constant to do but here you're with a group of people in the same boat. Here, I find it easier to associate with my own friends than with my own family."

"One of the beauties of TAG is that it offers so many things that you don't get if you are just looking for work or to develop skills – there is a myriad of activities under one roof."

Confidentiality

People talked about the fact that although a lot of information was volunteered about people's personal life within TAG, they were confident that no-one was told about this outside of the TAG setting. This was important to people and welcomed by them.

"I'm related to half of Brora, they know my business but not what I do here."

Self Belief

Trainees constantly talked about the positive impact TAG had on their well-being. This was one of the core messages that they wanted to pass on. TAG helps people feel good about themselves; it helps with achievement and provides energy and a boost to their confidence.

"It gives you a belief that you can do things."

"It turns your life around and puts you on the road to achieving stuff."

"I couldn't watch TV or listen to the radio. I couldn't make a cigarette. TAG helped make things better. My mind was better and things are relatively clear now. I still have off days and poor socialising and concentration but it's a lot better than it was."

"I found it helpful and it improved my concentration. I couldn't have mixed at school or University. If you get frustrated you can go for a cigarette or a coffee or, if you are not up to it, you could see someone or go home. There is no pressure if you are stressed out, it's very safe."

"This is a lifeline to us. I have been coming for 2-3 years. I was suffering with bad depression. It was the only place I could come to and meet people in the same circumstances. It helped me with learning and helped me get my confidence back and to get back into society."

A sense of achievement

For many trainees succeeding at something and doing well at something can become a distant memory. Being at TAG can turn this around:

"I got a sense of achievement for the first time in a long time of completing something and getting a certificate."

"It was a spring board as I went on to a supported placement and then with HUG and I am now even considering doing something with the college which is a big progression for me."

"I never saw any future until I came here, now I'm working."

"It's like therapy, it's what you need, you gain in confidence and self- esteem."

"It's given me hope. I couldn't see light at the end of the tunnel at the start. Now I can, the confidence boost is fantastic which is really important."

"Your sense of self- esteem is low already. In the mainstream it gets lower, here it increases."

"The effect on family. It gives my family hope to see me getting back on my feet and being positively engaged."

Emotional support from the staff

TAG is, for many people, a source of therapy. The staff (and users) are around to talk to and support trainees when life becomes difficult. They provide emotional support in a warm, compassionate and non-judgemental way. They pick up on problems as they arise and look out for people when they are in difficulty or are struggling to come in to the Unit.

"If you are not there for a time then they will go round and visit to check you're OK. Just being phoned up is good."

"Without here I don't feel I would be as far on mentally. It has really helped my mental health problems."

"If you do have a problem then you can talk to the staff and they will help you and won't give up."

"There are small numbers of people to the staff and it's easier. There is more 1:1 assistance which helps us progress."

"If you are having a bad day the staff are really good, they provide inspiration and motivation."

"It's my emergency service."

"It's literally a lifeline."

"Some people are alive because they come here."

Personal experience of the staff

Some of the staff at TAG have themselves experienced mental illness which not only provides an immediate sense of connection but also an inspiration and visible evidence that it is possible to move on from illness and unemployment.

"Some of the staff have had mental health problems which is good. To actually experience mental health problems and come out the other side gives them a deeper insight and ability to empathise. It also encourages you to do as well as them."

Staff dedication

Trainees pointed out that they find that the staff are hugely committed to the clients and TAG itself. This sends a really positive message about the Unit. There is also a sense of mutual effort and a partnership in what people are trying to achieve:

"Staff and trainees mingle; there is no sense of 'us and them'."

"You don't get chucked out, there's still feedback from people who have left and they can still get help."

"The staff are fantastic."

"We trust the staff – I've never heard a bad word about the staff."

"The staff are so friendly."

"The staff are very conscientious here."

Something to look forward to

Life on benefits can be dull and unrewarding. For trainees TAG offers a way out of the boredom of life when there is little to do:

"The people, the trainees are a good crowd. It was the highlight of my week. It was good fun. I will be sad to leave."

"It's obvious; it makes me get up in the morning and gets me out of bed."

Outings

Part of regaining confidence and health is being able to mix with mainstream society. But that creates its own pressure. Outing and trips are not only fun but are a way of joining in and believing that life can be good again:

"The trips were good. They were excellent fun."

Gaining a social life and sense of community

TAG helps trainees socialise and mix with other people and regain social networks which may have been lost. It also provides a safe space to meet new people but these new people are often people who have an understanding of what each person has been through as they themselves have experienced mental ill health. This can be a crucial to new trainees.

"I have made close friends at TAG. We used to go to the pub together after TAG. The main thing was that if I was in college I wouldn't have lasted three seconds. I can get panicky and take on too much energy to keep calm, when surrounded by strangers and having to be normal."

"I've met some really good people. Two or three that I would like to keep in contact with."

"The chance to make friends and socialise. This is especially good if you have been through a bad period."

"There is a lot of support for each other."

"You do things that you wouldn't ordinarily do. It helps with social skills and dealing with the outside world."

"I had low self esteem, I feel relaxed. Here I find comradeship and no pressure."

"I suffer from claustrophobia. I couldn't use mainstream services. I couldn't manage a non user place. I need the extra support here."

Moving beyond stigma

Stigma still has a big impact and can colour how a person sees other people or feels about themselves. Being at TAG stops people having to worry about such things both through the values of TAG itself and the comfort of knowing that they are amongst people who understand:

"The guys are open about their experience. A lot of people are embarrassed and ashamed. A lot of people don't realise we are ordinary people. There is no stigma at all in TAG. There is never a wrong word in here. It is helpful with a good attitude."

"It's a safe environment because everyone else has a mental health problem, everyone knows where you are coming from, and you don't have to hide who you are."

"No one is judgemental."

"People know where you are coming from because they've been there too. If they haven't they haven't a clue."

"Here we can be open about our illness without worrying."

The atmosphere

Time and again trainees praised the atmosphere within TAG especially the calmness, the lack of pressure and lack of judgement.

"There's a sense of warmth and purpose and structure."

"The staff get a good banter going."

"I just feel I wouldn't be able to go anywhere else. I don't get preached at. You can do it at your own pace and don't have to keep up."

"Here they make time for you and treat you as an individual."

"It's like an extension of your family."

"It's the 'craic', it makes me laugh, there is no hassle or harassment, and it's calm."

"It's the feeling inside yourself, we're all nice to each other, there are no cliques, its open and trusting."

"If you have difficulty with new places then here is a much safer environment."

"I've turned up in the morning in tears but its OK."

Advice and information

Staff in TAG are often the first people that clients turn to when they have problems. Staff frequently provide advice, support, information and advocacy in their role of being trusted and supported allies.

"They really support us with things like benefit reviews (which create a lot of stress and illness)."

"The only support I've had for my daughter has come from here."

"It helps with forms and so on and acts as advocates and supporters."

Other benefits

TAG offers various other benefits which clients appreciate. Many people with a mental illness can lose the motivation and willpower to cook for themselves. They may struggle to get in to the Unit or get out and about and often have a very low income.

So, although to some people being paid a very small amount of money for attendance may seem tokenistic this is not the case for many trainees. The payment of a small fee, the provision of a meal and sometimes transport or childcare can make a huge difference and in some cases allows people to attend the Unit who might not otherwise manage.

"We get lovely sandwiches provided and a small contribution to expenses which is a help. The £12 a week can make a big difference."

"They pay for nursery care; I couldn't come here without that."

"You get food here which is good. You often don't eat if you have a mental illness. Sometimes the two hot meals I get here are all I get all week."

Its' difference to a Drop In Centre

It became increasingly obvious during our meetings that TAG shared many functions that Drop In centres provide. Both, in their way, are lifelines and safe sources of support and activity but the trainees also saw clear differences.

To trainees TAG can be a stepping stone after a person has used a Drop In centre. To many, a Drop In provides a relaxed safe place where people can recuperate at their own pace whilst TAG is an opportunity for people to move on to a more focussed and structured day now that they have had the time and peace to lick their wounds and begin to look more actively for other things to do.

"It's almost a step on from the Drop In; you get better and move on to TAG. It helps with recovery"

"The Haven is more about rest, while here is more about education and qualifications."

Ways it could be improved

It is frequently said that training schemes with no time limit to them can sometimes trap people in a cycle of activity where training becomes of value only in itself but does not move people on into work or other opportunities.

However trainees at TAG often resist this attitude. TAG is more than employment; it is a source of therapy, a social network and a way of being occupied or getting a focus to the day. In an area like the Highlands where jobs are scarce anyway and when we acknowledge that not everyone in TAG is looking for mainstream work then the repeated comment that people do not like leaving after 2 years becomes easy to understand. Leaving can mean the loss of friends, activity, structure and something to look forward to in the week.

"The biggest problem is that it is for a limited time – what happens after that?"

The first steps

People talked about the anxiety they felt about making their first contact with TAG and the barrier this presented them but did say that compared to the mainstream it was very good.

"When I first came here I felt really scared but once you make the step it feels good."

"It's really hard to walk through the door, especially if you have been ill."

"Everyone talks; you can feel really out of place but it's not half as bad as with normal people."

The effect of uncertainty about funding

The uncertain future and the accompanying publicity that TAG has faced recently has had a heavy toll on both TAG trainees and staff:

"The service should definitely have security. It makes it hard for staff to function. It must be hard to handle the threat of losing jobs. They shouldn't have to live from year to year."

"I've only just started and it sounds like it might end. I want to do a course and what I want to achieve may take 4 – 5 years. I won't be able to do that as I have no motivation. I need encouragement to do it."

"If it closed it would affect all our lives and those yet to benefit from it."

"We can't plan to do other things when we don't know the future."

"Without this we would get ill or isolate ourselves at home"

"To get rid of it would be beyond me to understand"

Improvements

Accommodation

Some of the accommodation that TAG uses is inadequate and uninspiring. Trainees in some areas would appreciate purpose built units to use but do recognise that in the current financial climate this is unlikely to happen.

"The accommodation is not attractive; it's run down and institutional."

"The premises are not good because they are in the middle of a High School – kids can be the worst people to spot you in a place like this because they can be cruel."

"There are no private rooms for a blether."

"It would be good to have another room available for different types of work with more space and the chance to do crafts."

"The building itself is a bit of a depressing building in a depressing area."

Opening hours

TAG is not open 5 days a week anywhere and considerably less in some areas. Some trainees would like to attend more often.

"It's only open 1 day a week, we need more than that."

"I could come more; the act of coming in is empowering."

"My two half days are life savers."

Getting back into work

There is a lot of scepticism about the prospect of really ending up in employment however skilled and confident trainees become:

"At the end there is nothing; especially in Sutherland where there is little work."

"There is no employment. It's all about confidence. With no employment you can't get it. It would be lovely if we could do stuff at the end."

Information

There was a feeling that not enough people knew about TAG or referred people on although this did vary. In some areas there seemed to be a good awareness and in others much less.

"Not enough people know about it. I was lucky my doctor told me about it."

The pay

Although many people were glad to get "pay" for their attendance there were some who thought it could be invested more productively in other areas. They suggested

that they would be happy not to be paid if this meant they could stay in the Unit longer or that the money could be better invested in arts and crafts materials.

Waiting lists

Some people felt that in some areas there were long waiting lists to join TAG and felt that this was a pity.

Places where TAG does not operate

There was a lot of regret in Lochaber that the TAG unit no longer operated and a wish to reinstate it. There was also a feeling in Wester Ross that it was irrelevant to people as the travelling distance to the nearest Unit made attendance impossible.

New ventures

There was discussion and suggestion that TAG looked at the idea of developing a product that it could sell commercially to increase its viability.

New activities

Many people talked about the value of activity and suggested the following things could be promoted and advanced:

"More creative classes, book groups, photography, trips out as a group, healthy living, more groups to sit and do things together, more discussion but less focussed on learning, less emphasis on hard outcomes."

CONCLUSION

It is clear from our meetings with members of our network and current TAG clients that the service is held in high regard.

It provides an effective way to regain confidence and the skills needed to make life more rewarding and enjoyable. It does help people into employment, voluntary work and education as well as helping other people to find a productive structure to their day amongst people that they get on well with and trust.

For some people TAG is the highlight of their week and a place where they feel a sense of belonging, purpose and achievement.

Perhaps two of the most telling comments that we heard were the following:

"A place where there is laughter for a group of people whose laughter has gone missing" and "It gives a reason to appreciate the weekend."

These simple comments illustrate the hardship that mental ill health can cause and the ways in which places such as TAG can transform lives.

It is important to us that TAG gets into a position where it has secure funding and where all its premises are fit for purpose. It is also important that it grows and seeks new ways of working but that as it does so, it does this in partnership with its trainees and rests future development on the things that are most important to them. So, although the main aim of many people is to move on in life and regain a place in society and, most importantly, gain employment, many people value the lack of pressure and the fact that everyone in some way has a shared experience of mental illness. The fact that it provides comradeship, purpose and structure, and that this is sometimes all some people aspire to, needs to be remembered and respected.

If it can make sure that its future is based around the needs, wishes and experiences of its trainees then it can be confident in itself as a product and a service. To some people TAG is already a lifeline, an inspiration and a life saver. To be able to build on this and maintain this will ensure the continuing respect and support that its trainees have demonstrated by so clearly expressing how important TAG is to them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With thanks to all the members of HUG, and other mental health service users, who contributed to this report.

Please feel free to photocopy this report. The report can be supplied in large print or on tape.

However if you use this report or quote from it or use it to inform your practice or planning please tell us about this first. This helps us know what is being done on our behalf and helps us inform our members of the effect their voice is having.

For more information on HUG, or an Information Pack, call:

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