



From mother of two with a husband and home to life on the streets ... and back

The 'No Wrong Door Network' at work



A life transformed

Sally was a happily married mum to two children when her life started to spiral out of control. The depression, stemming from an unloving childhood and which she had managed for years with anti-depressants, began to take a grip. Before long she was an alcoholic making multiple suicide attempts. Her marriage broke down and she suffered domestic violence at the hands of her next partner. Diagnosed with a broken collarbone after one particularly bad beating she was given opiates for pain relief, which quickly led to a drug addiction. Next came a life on the streets, 'sofa surfing', grotty flats, dangerous hostels and prostitution to feed the habit.

She was in and out of contact with many different services. The social workers, outreach workers, hostel managers, police officers, doctors and nurses cared but were only able to treat the presenting problem. They didn't treat Sally as a whole person.

It was not until Sally met a drug outreach worker in Birmingham who addressed her homelessness at the same time as her drug and alcohol addiction and then depression that things started to change.

Today she is living independently and has been completely 'clean' for four years. An *Expert by Experience*, Sally is volunteering as an Involvement Champion on the In Reach Out Reach programme for Birmingham Changing Futures Together. She goes into the community where, drawing on her lived experience, she engages with service users and signposts them to the *No Wrong Door Network*.

Her story

Sally was born and grew up in Essex in an abusive household. As a teenager she drank alcohol to anaesthetise the pain. She escaped at 20 by getting pregnant but the relationship didn't last. She quickly met the man who was to go on to be her husband. They had a child together and he raised her first as his own. Together for 15 years they built a happy life, with a home, car and regular holidays.

Her depression, however, was being managed with anti-depressants rather than tackled and steadily, almost imperceptibly, Sally began to drink more and more. She made multiple attempts on her life, going in and out of hospital, always being discharged as soon as she was physically well.

The marriage broke down and Sally almost immediately entered a new relationship, this time with a man who was abusive. One particularly brutal beating resulted in a broken collarbone and opiates for pain relief. Before long she was addicted to Class A drugs.

She escaped the relationship, moving into a refuge in Essex. It was a welcome relief, but addressing only the issue of domestic violence, the deep-rooted causes of Sally's behaviour were not considered. As a result, it was not a surprise that after being put on a train to a hostel in Sandwell for her own safety, she quickly met another man and they moved out of the hostel into a flat just before Christmas. He too was an alcoholic and the relationship was violent from the beginning. After a chaotic year together he kicked Sally out and with nowhere to go she lived at the bottom of the stairwell in the block of flats.

A man, also a resident in the block of flats, offered her his sofa. That Christmas, in 2009, she was alone, sitting on the sofa drinking cheap cider.

There continued to be frequent points of contact with multiple agencies including the police, social services, the NHS and the local authority but with none able to work with Sally as a whole person, her downward spiral continued. After a fight with the man she moved out. Tackling only her homelessness, she was put in a private rented flat by the local authority and was soon taking crack cocaine, working as a prostitute on the Hagley Road to pay for the habit. She met a new man there and within two weeks had suffered sexual and physical abuse at his hands. He has since been convicted. As a temporary measure, Sally was put in a hotel by the police. A longer term solution would have been a women's refuge but there were no spaces so Sally was sent to another hostel, a potentially dangerous place for her. Surrounded by fellow addicts it was not surprising her offending behaviour continued.

The way forward

Positive change began when a drug outreach worker visited the hostel. He took the time to talk with her and persevered, not accepting her repeated rejections of his efforts. Eventually he persuaded her to move to a prescription for her drugs. Very slowly, Sally came to trust him and by Christmas 2011 she was off all Class A drugs, maintaining the prescription. The journey to recovery had begun.

The next year, at the instigation of her outreach worker, she began attending a rehabilitation programme. She was completely clean – no Class A drugs, alcohol or marijuana – by Christmas 2012. With the support of her assigned social worker she got access to psychological support and moved into an environment that provided 24 hour support for residents before progressing to a complex that mixed independence with accessible support.

She connected with the Birmingham Changes Futures Together programme and is now working as an Expert by Experience. Happily single and living independently in the community, the programme has transformed her life.

She is also back in touch with her children, very slowly rebuilding the relationships she lost.

She said:

“I am getting to know and love myself. I am a person with an identity, something I never had before. My psychologist has helped me to see I am important, I have choices and I can find a solution to my problems.”

“I used to be very alone, living a crazy, chaotic life, destructive for me and everyone around me. Today I respect others but most importantly I have learnt to respect myself.”

The trigger for change

In Sally’s own words, the hospitals and custody suites proved little more than a revolving door. Whether it was the offending behaviour, domestic violence or suicide attempt, it was only ever the problem that was being treated, something which is relatively straightforward. There was no lasting change until the whole person was seen and helped.

Contact the BVSC Birmingham Changing Futures Together team for more information.

www.changingfuturesbham.co.uk

The Birmingham Changing Futures Together Programme

The purpose of the Changing Futures Together programme is to improve the effectiveness of service provision to those with multiple and complex needs by working collaboratively with others to innovate new approaches, and identify and share best practice.

Sally’s story shows the value of seeing the person as a whole. A homeless person can be taken from the streets and put in a hostel but if the other challenges they face are not tackled the fix is fleeting. For those working on the frontline, this can be frustrating and demoralising, leaving them feeling alone and ineffective. The Changing Futures Together programme provides a ‘community of support’, facilitating interaction between like-minded colleagues and leading to better, more satisfying outcomes.

The **No Wrong Door Network** is at the heart of the approach. The network is a group of organisations working together to ensure service users, with at least two of the four complex needs (homelessness, substance misuse, offending and mental health) can access a whole system through one referral.

