



## St Basils Psychologically Informed Environments – meeting the emotional and psychological needs of young homeless people

St Basils has been providing supported accommodation and a range of services to homeless young people across the West Midlands, many of whom were increasingly presenting with complex trauma and higher/multiple needs. These issues led St Basils to develop a PIE approach in partnership with Dr Nick Maguire from the University of Southampton and local mental health services in 2011.

This case study outlines how St Basils, a housing service which supports young homeless people, has implemented and evaluated a bespoke psychologically-informed environment (PIE) to meet the emotional and psychological needs of their clients. It focusses on the transformation of St Basils into a psychologically-aware housing service.

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## Introduction

It is increasingly recognised that supported housing services provide an opportunity to achieve more for their clients beyond providing for the basic needs of food, shelter, and so on. Many clients will have suffered from some degree of emotional trauma and have a history of abuse, neglect, broken relationships, or other adverse circumstances. For 16- to 25-year-olds living in supported accommodation, homelessness also occurs at a critical point in their neurological, physical, social, and emotional development. Numerous and complex problems often disrupt this development, which may be why so many homeless young people report a lack of independent living skills, have low self-perceptions, and find it difficult to form trusting relationships.<sup>1</sup>

Ideally, supported housing services should aim to help their clients flourish and thrive, not just survive difficult circumstances. Indeed, such services are well-positioned to enable clients to change their lives by developing interpersonal (e.g., building trust, seeking social support, communicating thoughts and feelings) and intrapersonal skills (e.g., goal setting, planning) using psychologically minded approaches. The resultant mental skills can stop the vicious cycle that leads to social exclusion and entrenched homelessness by facilitating individuals to be independent and successfully engage in education, work, and training (featured in an earlier Housing LIN case study).<sup>2</sup>

## Psychologically-informed services

To improve clients' social inclusion and personal development, it is crucial to address both their psychological and emotional needs and those of the frontline staff who support them. The concept of Psychologically Informed Environments (PIE) was introduced by Johnson and Haigh<sup>3</sup> to encourage housing services for homeless people to identify, adapt, and consciously use features of their managed environment.

To foster more psychologically-informed services, operational guidance has been published by the Department for Communities and Local Government and National Mental Health Development Unit.<sup>4</sup> This guidance outlines five key areas:

1. **Developing a psychological framework:** A PIE service will explicitly use one or more schools of psychology to inform behaviour, decisions, processes and procedures (e.g., the psychodynamic paradigm, cognitive and behavioural approaches, humanistic psychology). There is no one correct framework to adopt. Rather, Johnson and Haigh (2010) encourage services to consider what is appropriate for their setting and how to best meet the needs of their clients.

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<sup>1</sup> Homeless Link (2015). Young and Homeless 2015. [www.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/site-attachments/201512%20-%20Young%20and%20Homeless%20-%20Full%20Report.pdf](http://www.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/site-attachments/201512%20-%20Young%20and%20Homeless%20-%20Full%20Report.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Cumming J & Anderson G (2016). The Mental Skills Training for Life programme for Homeless Young People. [www.housinglin.org.uk/HousingRegions/WestMidlands/?&msg=0&parent=1022&child=10270](http://www.housinglin.org.uk/HousingRegions/WestMidlands/?&msg=0&parent=1022&child=10270)

<sup>3</sup> Johnson R & Haigh R (2010). Social psychiatry and social policy for the 21st century # new concepts for new needs: the 'psychologically-informed environment', *Mental Health and Social Inclusion*, Vol. 14 Iss 4 pp. 30 – 35. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5042/mhsi.2010.0620>

<sup>4</sup> Keats H, Cockersell P, Johnson R & Maguire N (2012) Psychologically informed services for homeless people: Good Practice Guide. [www.rjaconsultancy.org.uk/PIEconcept.html](http://www.rjaconsultancy.org.uk/PIEconcept.html)

2. **The physical environment and social spaces:** A PIE service will thoughtfully design and manage different levels of the environment with service client input. There is an emphasis on the social environment (e.g., to be warm, caring, empathetic, and psychologically safe) but PIE also involves making considerations for the built environment (e.g., for services to be pleasant and inviting places to live).
3. **Staff training and support:** Staff working in a PIE service are provided with consistent and evidence-based approaches to working, which enables reflection and behaviour that is “just beyond common sense”. Although not delivering formal therapy, following this training, support staff will be able to maintain compassionate and therapeutic-like relationships with service clients and explain what they do in terms of meeting their emotional and psychological needs (Johnson & Haigh, 2010). By taking this approach, it is expected that staff will be less likely to take challenging behaviour personally and more willing to support those with higher/more complex needs.
4. **Managing relationships:** At the heart of a PIE service is a commitment to prioritising relationships between frontline staff and service clients, and viewing these relationships as the most valuable tool for facilitating positive behaviour change.
5. **Evaluation of outcomes:** Within a PIE service, the measurement of and reflection on outcomes should occur routinely at different levels. At an organisational level, monitoring the impact of PIE and systematically reflecting on its implementation is an opportunity for housing services to identify what is working, what is not working, and how to improve in the future as part of constant cycles of learning. This evaluation also provides evidence of the effectiveness of the housing service that can form evidence for future funders and policy makers. Of equal importance is the support worker who helps an individual client to record and measure their progress towards a specific goal, providing data to identify problem areas and increase motivation and belief in change.

## **St Basils Psychologically Informed Environments (PIE)**

Over the last five years, St Basils have grown their model into a whole organisation approach. They view PIE as not simply a set of techniques aimed at service clients, but a cultural framework for how different parts of the organisation relate to each other. A consistent psychological approach is taken across a range of services including their bespoke Mental Skills Training for Life™ and Parenting Young People™ programmes. This approach also extends to staff, so whether in keyworking sessions, informal discussions in common areas, or when problems occur; the young people have regular experiences of positive, healthy, validating relationships.

### **Psychological Framework**

Aligned with best practice recommendations, St Basils’ PIE model is trauma-informed and draws on aspects of three main psychological approaches: (1) cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT), (2) dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT), and cognitive analytic therapy (CAT). This framework is made explicit to staff in their foundation training and shapes a shared language and set of expectations for staff to use in their day-to-day work.

## Environment

Taking a holistic approach, staff create a physical and social environment that is affirming, caring, empowering, and validating. Collaboration is also crucial, with every individual supported to determine their own personal goals and achievements. Furthermore, young people are regularly involved in making decisions about the environment in which they live and this input is used to guide the changes that are made.

## Staff Training and Support

As part of a commitment to being psychologically-informed, St Basils provide their staff with ongoing training and support via formal courses, reflective practice, and access to the in-house psychologist (**Figure 1**). Managers also give staff the time and space to develop a psychologically-minded approach, recognising that maintaining a PIE is a dynamic and ongoing process for everyone.

### 1. Training

St Basils staff are trained to recognise and understand the complex emotional and behavioural issues experienced by young people whom they support. The PIE Foundation Training Course is three days long; all staff attend the first day and frontline staff receive a further two days. It provides staff with an understanding of adolescent brain development, drawing from the latest research findings, as well as a basic understanding of theories of behaviour change. This information lays the groundwork for helping staff to recognise their role in supporting young people to manage their own behaviour.

The training also encourages staff to take an empathic and explicit approach to rules and discipline by formulating reasons for the challenging behaviours that may occur. To do so, staff are equipped in how to meet psychological needs of young people with a set of tools and modes of communication; for example:

- Empathic listening
- Open questions
- Problem formulation
- Motivational interviewing
- Validation
- Vicious cycles

Further training is also provided for staff in management positions (PIE Managers Training Course) and for staff to become champions of PIE in their housing projects (PIE Champions Course).

In PIE training, participants learn about models and tools that can be applied to their work



PIE Foundation training aims to get all participants actively involved in learning, whilst having fun!



## 2. Reflective practice

A key component of St Basils' PIE model is the reflective practice groups led by their in-house clinical psychologist. These monthly sessions provide staff with dedicated opportunities for shared learning and reflections such as by discussing a complex case or addressing questions that are currently on their minds (e.g. "What is autism spectrum disorder?"). This can serve as a refresher to the training courses as well as provide opportunities for staff to further develop knowledge and skills.

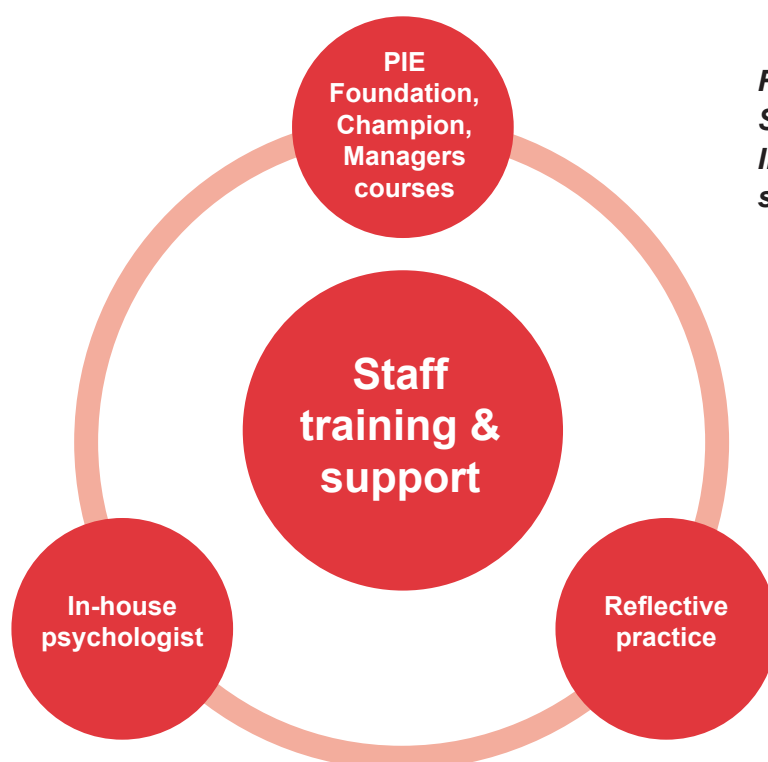
Reflective Practice groups ensure knowledge and skills gained from training are implemented and embedded in everyday work.



Furthermore, these sessions can also lessen the intense emotional impact of working with homeless young people by giving staff a chance to get perspective, clarify, or de-personalise situations that may have occurred. Also importantly, these discussions serve to reassure staff and so they feel less alone in any struggles they might be having. In doing so, these reflective practice sessions support staff well-being and prevent them from reaching breaking point.

## 3. In-house psychologist

In addition to reflective practice, the in-house clinical psychologist leads the strategic development and implementation of PIE; for example, targeting additional support in areas of higher need or developing bespoke training. Another aspect of the role is leading on case consultations and providing debriefing support following serious incidents, as well as developing clearer referral pathways for young people with serious mental health problems.



**Figure 1. Components of St Basils' Psychologically Informed Environments (PIE) staff training and support.**

## Evaluation

As part of ongoing reflection and evidencing of impact, St Basils engages in systematic evaluation of their PIE model. This is done in conjunction with researchers from the University of Birmingham and involves identifying outcomes of PIE at different levels: young people, staff, and St Basils as an organisation (see **Figure 2** for example expected outcomes).

Young People	Staff	Organisation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Psychological and emotional needs are better understood by staff.</li> <li>• Fewer warnings issued.</li> <li>• Reduction in evictions and unplanned departures.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More consistent and structured approach to work.</li> <li>• More confident at managing young people with complex needs.</li> <li>• Less staff sickness and improved well-being and job satisfaction.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Better outcomes for young people with higher risks/needs.</li> <li>• Better teamwork and communication between staff.</li> <li>• Improved retention of staff and less turnover.</li> </ul>

**Figure 2. Different levels of expected outcomes of St Basils' PIE model.**

This evaluation involves formal and informal feedback about the effectiveness of PIE, with data collected from staff and young people using a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods. The information is analysed, reflected upon and then used to guide recommendations and future improvements. For example, 68% of staff responding in a survey agreed that St Basils operates as a psychologically-aware organisation in which managers, staff and young people are encouraged to continually learn and develop. The latest round of feedback, however, identified a need for this feature of the service to be made more explicit in recruitment documents. Future job advertisements will now include a specific statement about St Basils' PIE.

The gathered evidence is also used to demonstrate to staff that what they are doing both matters and is having a positive impact on the young people they support. In a recent focus group, front line staff commented on how working at St Basils can be noticeably different from other non-PIE workplaces:

*“I think other environments and other workplaces that I've been, they will look at a situation if it is challenging and it's managed in terms of you've broken a rule so it's a warning, or there's an issue with staff, so it's maybe mediated and that's it. Whereas, here I think because of PIE we have a bit more... we have those skills to look at it a little bit deeper and patterns of behaviour and psychology behind things” – Frontline staff*

The findings also reinforce the time and effort needed to develop staff who are confident in psychological thinking. In turn, higher levels of confidence are related to greater well-being

and less ill-being amongst staff. For instance, St Basils staff who report being more confident in their use of PIE also have greater job satisfaction and more engagement with their job, and fewer symptoms of burnout.

There are also likely wider benefits for health care services, including local mental health trusts, to document in future evaluations. St Basils provides psychologically informed support to young people who may have significant needs but are unable or unwilling to engage with traditional types of intervention. Utilising the skills of applied psychologist and therapists in this way provides a means of supporting young people with psychological expertise and, where required, assist with improving referral pathways.

## Lessons learned

Overall, the evaluation indicates that St Basils has been successful in implementing PIE within their services. It has also led to a number of lessons learned. One of these is that the quality of relationships matters. To break through any past history of adversity and abandonment, and to develop genuine trust and rapport, there is a need for consistent and stable contact between staff and young people. This type of relationship must be nurtured with time and attention, which has practical implications for both staff workload and the length of time young people stay at St Basils.

It also takes time and confidence for staff to use the PIE tools and approaches. It is evident that one-off training will not lead to a workforce that has widely adopted a psychological mindset. Rather organisations need to view PIE as an ongoing commitment. Reflective practice sessions serve as part of continuing development opportunities for staff. However, regular sessions can be hard to maintain unless these sessions are meaningful and relevant to staff. It is therefore important for staff to drive the agenda for these sessions, bringing forth topics that they would like to discuss and feel would be of most value to them.

A large part of a successful PIE also involves managers 'buying-in' to the concept and promoting the benefits to staff. Where PIE works well, managers have a positive attitude towards it and view the time needed for training and reflective practice as worthwhile endeavours.

*"If the manager buys into the concept then they sell that concept, that's what a manager does. They orchestrate change and they orchestrate how people buy into things, how they can use that and, like you say, it isn't extra work, it's just another addition to support which is brilliant. It's another string to their bow."* – St Basils manager

It is also critical for managers to consider themselves as role models for putting PIE into practice. They can do this by regularly supporting their staff in ways that are consistent with PIE, whether by using formulations and open questions when conducting performance development reviews, or by providing an empathic ear to listen to cases staff are struggling with. In recognition of their PIE role, St Basils staff in managerial positions have their own reflective practice groups, and these sessions provide them with opportunities to share learning and experiences with others in a similar role.

## Conclusions

Becoming a Psychologically Informed Environment requires supported housing services to embrace a psychological approach in all aspects of their work and perhaps a changing mindset about staff roles and relationships with service clients. To develop a bespoke framework, such as St Basils PIE, does take time and ongoing support and reflection. However, the benefits appear to far outweigh the costs, with a happier and healthier workplace for staff and better outcomes for young people.



St Basils  
Psychologically  
Informed  
Environments

## Note

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Housing Learning and Improvement Network.

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