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Sure Start Friends 2005

A Befriending Service for Refugee and Asylum
Seekers.

Sure Start Foleshill

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EVALUATION OF SURE START IN COVENTRY

Annual Report 2005 Sure Start Friends

Introduction

Sure Start Friends are a befriending service set up to work specifically with Refugee and Asylum Seekers.

In October 2003 a sub group of the Sure Start Foleshill partnership board, the Black and Minority Ethnic group (BME) group tendered for monies to set up a pilot study of a befriending service which would run for six months (October 2003 – March 2004). The pilot study would test the feasibility of the service and develop working links with Social services. The service would be known as 'Sure Start Friends', and would work with Refugee and Asylum Seekers in the area. Referrals would come via Social Services and the key worker would be based in the Social Services department in order to develop their joint working.

During the pilot study three families were referred from Social Services and the key worker worked closely with them. Clear working protocols were set up, the aims and objectives of the service were identified and a detailed job description completed.

During this time initial plans were also developed to recruit and train a group of volunteers to become Sure Start Friends.

In order to justify on going expenditure on this service The key worker evaluated the pilot study using Sure Start targets as a framework. Despite the modest numbers involved in the pilot study, all of the Sure Start targets have been reached, including smoking cessation.

Following on from the success of the pilot study, monies were granted for a period of one year to allow the project to continue. The first cohort of Sure Start Friends were trained and a report of the evaluation of the course and the impact of the training on individuals was documented. (See Sure Start Foleshill first annual report).

This report details further exploration of the development of the Sure Start Friends initiative, from Sure Start Foleshill.

Methods used

The enquiry used three methods of data collection,

- Interviews with the key worker, Wendy Ohanjanian (WO) Consultant from Interpret 8 and Project co-ordinator for Sure Start Friends
- An evaluation of the second cohort of 'Sure Start Friends'
- Focus group with members of the first Friends cohort, one year on

She [course leader] has a way of getting me to understand, she can always find some way of helping me to understand something, she's just a really good teacher...(Friends course participant)

The training of the initial cohort of 'Friends', its subsequent evaluation and reflection of the process identified a number of issues for consideration.

Main issues arising from first cohort:

Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) Police security checks: at the time of the first cohort there were very long delays in completing these necessary checks. A recognised person was required to 'sign off' the required documentation and initially WO did not have that status. Others who did have, were unfamiliar with much of the documentation produced by Refugees and Asylum seekers which then resulted in further delays.

Only two Friends have undertaken unaccompanied visits, and WO has accompanied the majority. A number of problems have led to this situation:

- primarily Sure Start systems were unable to cope with payment of volunteers (expenses only) could not access petty cash,
- Telephone vouchers were promised but delays resulted in using WO phone only.
- Childcare; was not in place

What changes have been made to the second course?

Evaluation, reflection and experience meant that changes to the course were inevitable: the following have all been implemented:

- Timing and duration: originally sessions lasted from 10-2.30 which incorporated a half hour lunch break, but was also more costly as full day childcare expenses were incurred. The second training course ran sessions from 9am – 1pm, a change which was well received by participants and also immediately cut the childcare costs by half.
- Structure: Although essentially the course structure remained unchanged, the amount of material covered was less extensive but more in-depth, having been refined in the light of experience gained over the last year, and therefore tailored to the participants needs.

- Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) Police security checks: The previous cohort suffered delays in receiving CRB clearance and so were therefore unable to make unaccompanied befriending visits. WO is now approved to 'sign off' the CRB checks and is familiar with the Home Office documentation – this meant that all necessary documentation was completed within the first few weeks of the course.
- Childcare – A 'parent-choice' nursery system has been set up in order to provide childcare for the volunteers which offers continuity and stability for the child.
- Telephone: a £5 telephone voucher is now available per month, as yet the take up of this has been low.

The second cohort of Sure Start friends

The second cohort of eleven women commenced their Sure Start friends training in January 2005. The majority had been recruited to the course via the key worker, Wendy Ohanjanian (WO), but also via other Sure Start staff, through the Coventry Refugee centre and even through a web site advertising volunteer jobs (www.doit.org.uk)

In order to create a clearly identifiable image, course participants have been equipped with Sure Start volunteer t-shirts, pens, diaries and 'Friends' ring binders.

Evaluation of this course again proved to be highly positive; and as with the initial cohort the motivation for attending the course stemmed predominantly from the desire to help others, in particular asylum seekers and refugees.

'Work with people from different communities, help refugees and asylum seekers. I belong to the minorities so understand and have experienced prejudice. If it wasn't for courses like these I wouldn't be confident, so am keen to help others'(course participant)

Working with a large sheet of brown paper, course participants were invited to place a mark on horizontal line marked on the left with 'not at all well' and on the right 'extremely well' in response to the question, 'how well has this course prepared you to become a Sure Start friend'?

Participants individually placed their marks along the line; one mark recorded 5, the others were all between 7-9.

Participants were then invited to give reasons as to why they hadn't scored the course as a 10, an exercise which they did not find easy. Reasons given were predominantly based around a lack of 'practical' experience- although participants appeared to recognise that theory was very important they would appreciate having some practical experience as part of this course.

A number of participants thought that the course could be longer, information would then be more in-depth. Two participants stated that they would like to have seen the course accredited.

Identifying the positive aspects of the course was a much easier exercise and participants had much to say and comment on; they particularly valued the knowledge and understanding gained whilst on the course which they felt to be very relevant and useful. WO herself was continually identified as being a key component of the course, making the course fun and being a 'brilliant' teacher. The following is typical of the type of comments made,

'Wendy's dedication to her women, both 'Friends' and befrienders is inspiring and came across throughout the course'

The evaluation continued with a discussion of both the negative and positive comments generated, the aim of which was to produce a consensus score. The participants allocated an overall score of 8 for the course, Further discussions produced three areas where participants felt the course may be improved, these were;

- Go on a visit as an observer
- Course to be accredited
- More courses like this over the city, in other Sure Start areas

It is important to note here that the *process* of undertaking the Sure Start Friends course is given as much primacy as the possible outcome of achieving 'Friends' status. For course participants; many of whom were befriended themselves, attendance at such a course represented an enormous leap of faith. The majority did not speak English as a first language and were very unconfident about their language skills and ability to communicate with others. Therefore, for many, the journey the course represents is as important as the end result of achieving 'Friends' status.

The initial group of Sure Start Friends, one year on

A further exploration of the first cohort of Sure Start Friends was deemed to be useful in developing a greater understanding of how well the course had prepared them to become befrienders and also capture the impact of such involvement a year later.

The participants developed important friendships which have been sustained over the intervening year. They gained confidence and knowledge in a relaxed but structured environment which allowed them to gain skills in English - a crucial requisite to becoming participating members of their community.

Following successful completion of the Friends training course, participants were then required to complete at least four visits, accompanied by WO, before

gaining Sure Start 'Friends' status. A Friend would then be introduced to a prospective recipient of the service and after an initial meeting, facilitated by WO, both parties would sign an agreement that they would be happy to work with each other.

In order to further explore this group, an in – depth enquiry with a sample of the original group was developed. A focus group was selected as being the most appropriate method of promoting self disclosure among participants, to enable the researcher to gain an honest understanding of how people think or feel. Of the initial cohort of group of thirteen, all have continued to access further training, five of the women are now working, and three have embarked on their NVQ in Childcare qualification. Two have now completed level 2.

A mix of participants were purposefully selected for the focus group, including two who had moved into full time employment, two who had undertaken further training and two who were working as Sure Start Friends. All agreed to be part of the focus group.

One potential participant was unable to attend the focus group at the last minute, due to her work commitments. Therefore five participants were present plus the key worker and researcher.

Lunch was provided, permission to tape record the interview was sought and given and reasons for the group explained once again. The researcher strived to achieve a relaxed, permissive non- judgemental environment.

Analysis

Due to the nature of the recording, which contained many repetitions and translations for and by participants (all of whom spoke English as a second language) an abridged transcript was produced and tape based analysis ensued. This was aided by the production of field notes and further triangulation of data from interviews with the key worker.

Issues raised

A number of barriers existed which have inhibited the extent to which the 'Friends' have been able to assume their intended role of becoming fully fledged Sure Start Friends and undertaking unaccompanied visits.

The barriers are composed of a variety of problems; the first being with obtaining Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) Police security checks. At the time of the first cohort there were very long delays in completing these necessary checks. A recognised person was required to 'sign off' the required documentation and initially WO did not have that status. Others who did have, were unfamiliar with much of the documentation produced by Refugees and Asylum seekers which then resulted in further delays.

Financial problems arose in not having a system in place in order to pay volunteers. Primarily Sure Start systems were unable to cope with the payment of volunteers (for expenses only) and could not access petty cash. 'Friends' needed

to use the phone for arranging their visits, telephone vouchers had been requested but use of the telephone became difficult as the promised telephone vouchers were delayed resulting in using WO phone only.

Most of the Friends had childcare responsibilities, their children were to be cared for by Sure Start early years workers, however in practice the logistics proved to be difficult. The resolution of these problems took both time and perseverance, a delay of seven months ensued whilst awaiting authorisation from management for both payments for volunteers and authorisation of childcare arrangements. These problems, although all eventually overcome, contrived to delay volunteers implementing their unaccompanied visits. At the present time two of the focus group are conducting unaccompanied visits.

Preparation for the role of a Sure Start Friend

One of the main aims of the session was to understand how prepared the participants had been by the Sure Start Friends course. The evaluation at the end of the classroom based teaching period had been particularly positive, however it would be interesting to see if participants still held the same view in the light of their practical experiences.

The group were unanimous in confirming their positive experiences and the fact that they felt they had received comprehensive preparation for their future roles,

'It was what I expected'

'I think its very good, I get comfortable, confidence with Sure Start [Friends course] with listening... speaking – make a friend, that was great, and when she [recipient of service] had some problem and spoke to me, she able to confide in me, that was good.'

No one reported negative experiences

this participant describes a situation where the recipient of her befriending service is very wary and suspicious, the befriender reassures the recipient about the issue of confidentiality;

'She was shy, the first time, she wouldn't tell anything, but she was worried... she didn't want to open up because she was worried about the confidentiality, so I explained everything for her to see we did the course.... about the confidentiality.... we are not allowed to tell anybody about your problem, that I am not allowed to share your information – its confidential.....and now she was open she explained everything she say before I was worried about everything, and then she was very happy'

Befriending for the first time;

The first time, I was shy...but when I came here Wendy give me lot of help so now I want to give back to people

Once again the impact of the course on themselves and their lives were stressed. The Friends made frequent reference to the impact of the course on themselves, one stressed the value of making friends with others on the course. They all agreed with this participant who had moved into full time work,

Having better understanding of your family, what their needs are, and your friends and then later on when you go into society, you have a relationship with other people, or your clients, or any other people then..... you can apply these things you have learned, have better understanding of peoples needs. When they are coming from, different background their needs are different

The cultural and social mix of the befriending group had had many positive benefits particularly around increasing knowledge of other cultures, and also developing friendships.

People coming from different backgrounds, everyone is in their own shell, I think I am right because that is the way I was brought up,...you know , this is my religion, the way I live, this is my culture but then ..you get to know other people.. they have their own ways of life you get to respect their own ways of life no matter what. You learn that there are other people around, they live differently ..you learn that just because it doesn't match the way you live, it doesn't mean they are not good, that they are less than you.. it.. it definitely raised my understanding of other peoples lives, so I can have empathy towards them..without ..you know .. judging them

The initial evaluation of the Friends course revealed just how important it had been for the participants terms of raising their own self esteem and confidence building. A year on the women still feel strongly about the confidence that completing the course gave them, One said

It [the course] helped me, it helped me a lot. I was very unconfident...

she goes on to say just how much she wants to be working, outside of the home and relates some of her experiences in job seeking. Having moved into full time work this participant reflects on the preparation that the course gave her,

I have a better understanding of women and their issues. I have been able to build up a very good relationship with them, for me, doing this

course and having some familiarity with the issues surrounding you know, single women and their problems I can say I have been able to build up a very close relationship with them.

Another women is looking for a college course to improve her English, others recognise the importance of speaking and understanding the language well. WO comments how she needed the services of an interpreter the first time she met many of the women.

Two of the women who have been befriending unaccompanied are now contributing to the development of others by accompanying women from the second cohort of the 'Friends' course, thus completing a circle moving from being befriended to befriender to contributing to the development of future befrienders.

One challenging issue emerging from the dialogue is the case of a befriender becoming 'over friendly' and the boundaries between role and responsibilities of the befriender becoming blurred. This has happened in one particular case and has been managed so far by having distinct visits which are 'Sure Start Friends' official visits and others which are of a personal nature. The challenges of maintaining this boundary need to be raised with prospective befrienders.

A second important issue emerging from this evaluation is the need for WO to expand her group of befrienders who are able to perform unaccompanied visits, they will be able contribute to the training experiences of those wanting to complete the course, and free up some of WO's time.

Further developments to WO's role:

Social service advisor; Wo regularly attends Foleshill Social Services and makes herself available to give advice and information to social workers and those working in the family support capacity. This assists in them dealing with Refugee and Asylum seekers in cases where a referral to the 'Friends' service is not possible. The effort has been greatly appreciated in addition to the co-working on cases that are referred to the 'Friends' service

Cultural awareness and 'Myth Busting' Training

WO has implemented cultural awareness and myth busting training sessions about Refugee and Asylum seekers beyond the Sure Start team, to partnership agencies such as Social Services in Foleshill, Cornerstone, NCH Regional Management, and Network 6.

This is valued partnership working which enables improved service delivery to Refugee and Asylum seekers.

Coventry Partnership Refugee and Asylum seekers

- Integration group
- Childcare group
- Myth busting training group

All are attended by WO. The experience gained through the development of Sure Start Friends is valued as an innovative initiative and a model which may provide a blueprint for the development of similar services by other groups.

Key points & Summary

- An innovative and constructive example of Sure Start working with what may be defined as a traditionally 'hard to reach' group
- An example of productive multi-agency working between Sure Start Foleshill and Social Services
- Sharing of experience, knowledge gained and value with a wide variety of partner agencies.
- This well planned and executed initiative maintains momentum and demonstrates evidence of sustainability
- Evaluation of the second course remains highly positive and provides evidence that the aims and objectives of the course have been met to the highest standards.
- The impact of being involved with Sure Start Friends, and Sure Start in general has endured over the intervening year with participants maintaining the increased levels of confidence and the subsequent positive effects of that on partners and families continues.
- Lessons gained from both evaluation and reflection have been acted upon, and subsequent changes instigated.
- The issues hampering progress have been addressed with time and persistence, however projects such as Sure Start Friends may well flounder if bureaucracy cannot become more responsive.
- WO needs to maintain a group of befrienders who are able to do unaccompanied visits in order to free some of her time.
- Much of the success of this initiative is due to the enthusiasm and commitment of the key worker, WO, described by her students as 'inspirational'
- It is both startling and worrying to find that WO remains without a contract from Sure Start Foleshill. This situation has persisted from March 04.
- The befriending group are to consider extending their activities to encompass new European Union arrivals who currently have no support.
- Sure Start Friends is to appear as a practical example of 'Good Practice' in a publication entitled '*Housing and Support Services for Asylum Seekers, Refugees and other New Migrants – A Good Practice Guide by John Perry for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.*
- The Sure Start Friends model has attracted interest from other Sure Start programmes, both locally and across the West Midlands where advice and service provision is being sought.

Acknowledgements

The research was undertaken as part of the evaluation of Sure Start Coventry and was funded by Coventry City Council and Coventry Primary Care Trust. Principal investigators were Chris Coe and Nick Spencer, with Maria Stuttaford as a named researcher. Carol Aubrey is a co-investigator with Sarah Dahl as a researcher on the project. The study would not have been possible without the co-operation of the many respondents that agreed to participate and gave their time to teach us about their lives.