

Women's Health Advice Centre

Evaluation briefing

Women's Health Advice Centre (WHAC) has been delivering services to women in Northumberland for over 25 years. WHAC supports women with often complex problems, commonly related to their health or employability. They also help women who face many barriers to access other services in the community. WHAC is a key organisation in the network of provision for women in Northumberland, with a small core staff and a large team of volunteers. This is a summary of an independent evaluation that examined services delivered between 2008 and 2011.

Introduction

WHAC provides a series of services to women in Northumberland aged from 14 years upwards. These include:

- Counselling (funded by the Big Lottery and Northumberland Care Trust): this is delivered by a team of well trained professionals on a voluntary basis, free at the point of access.
- Health promotion activities (funded by Fair Share): these are central to the WHAC's ethos and are currently provided in collaboration with four community organisations in Seaton Valley.
- One-to-one support (funded by the Big Lottery and Working Neighbourhoods Fund): this is delivered by volunteers who meet with clients who do not need formal counselling but do need the support of a 'friend' or mentor.
- Support and Advice Service (funded by Big Lottery and Working Neighbourhoods Fund): WHAC provides women with support and direction to access a range of services, including family law, debt advice, information on healthy eating, further education, back to work and personal development courses.
- Training and education (funded by Big Lottery and Working Neighbourhoods Fund): WHAC delivers a number of education and training courses both provided from WHAC's premises and via outreach.
- Volunteering opportunities: WHAC provides the opportunity to volunteer in a variety of ways, including as a counsellor, an organisational support volunteer, a volunteer mentor or as a trustee.

Between 2008 and 2011, WHAC's key outputs have been:

- » 366 clients receiving over 2000 hours of counselling
- » 48 education and training courses with 2077 attendances
- » 1060 clients accessing the Support and Advice Service
- » 405 people receiving one-to-one support and over 12000 receiving telephone support
- » 33 volunteers helping deliver services and supporting WHAC, giving 4422 hours of time.

Referrals into WHAC come from a wide variety of services, with most people being referred either by a GP or referring themselves. GPs and other public health and employability agencies refer women to WHAC for counselling and therapeutic support.

Since 2008, WHAC has raised £658,000 from the Big Lottery, Northumberland Care Trust, Northumberland County Council, Ministry of Justice and invested this in supporting and improving the lives of women in South East Northumberland.



Evaluation findings

The evaluation produced a series of findings, which have been divided into general findings, findings from service users and findings from partner agencies. We make the following general findings.

- WHAC has achieved or is on target to achieve its agreed outputs: WHAC has fulfilled its funding obligations and in many cases has exceeded them.
- WHAC supports women who experience a range of complex problems: with poor mental health including stress, depression and anxiety being the most common issues, followed by relationship problems, self esteem, bereavement and domestic violence.
- WHAC is a highly professional organisation with comprehensive staff and volunteer support systems: this is evident on a number of levels, from the trust and respect afforded WHAC by other organisations, to the systems and processes in place.
- WHAC operates in a similar way to a one-stop-shop: it does this through offering a series of other services that address health and other needs.
- WHAC is able to respond effectively to client and service user needs: WHAC has the flexibility to respond in a reactive manner to the needs of clients and service users.
- WHAC delivers a variety of well attended courses: since 2008, WHAC has delivered 48 courses including new courses in arts and crafts, life coaching and managing stress as well as the popular courses in self development, confidence building, relaxation and creative writing.
- WHAC has provided women with the support they needed to stay in employment: there was evidence to indicate that WHAC kept some women in employment. Without WHAC's intervention, a number of women would have left work due to mental health problems.
- WHAC's services are provided to and accessed by all: it was reported by one senior manager interviewed that "WHAC transcends social boundaries".
- WHAC's counselling services are being accessed by increasing numbers of young people: in 2009/2010 a total of 15 percent of all counselling clients were aged under 25 and in 2010/2011, the percentage rose to 26 percent.
- The Fair Share project has achieved its

objectives and has had wide ranging health impacts: the project has expanded and increased access to exercise and improved diet in local communities.

- The Fair Share project also resulted in the increased use of community resources for health-related activities: one community venue said that the project had resulted in between 20 and 30 additional community centre users each week.
- WHAC has assisted Northumberland County Council and Northumberland Employability and Work Service achieve their strategic employability objectives: WHAC engaged with economically inactive claimants and provided support to tackle both mental and physical health and employability barriers in the most deprived parts of the county.
- WHAC was able to effectively adapt its services to provide a focus on employability: WHAC's core service is women's health but as ill health and worklessness are closely associated with each other, WHAC was able to incorporate both when working with clients.

"They are the kind of organisation that Public Health England should be investing in".

Senior manager,
Northumberland Care
Trust

The evaluation made the following client and service user findings:

- The services of WHAC are highly regarded by clients and service users: this appreciation is reported both from WHAC's base in Ashington and of its outreach work.
- WHAC's interventions encourage people to progress into employment, volunteering or further education: the responses in the training and education evaluation forms demonstrate that the courses encouraged people to progress onto other productive activities.
- The health promotion activities and the health-related courses improved people's health: there were many reports from people that they felt in better health as a result of participating in the health-related activities.
- The counselling is reported by WHAC's clients to improve their mental health enabling them to recover: this has a series of positive impacts on women, their families and communities.

- WHAC's long term presence was particularly appreciated by clients: many women who use WHAC's services reported a major benefit to them was feeling secure in the knowledge that they could go back to WHAC for support in times of need.

The evaluation made the following findings from research with partner agencies.

- WHAC is a trusted and respected organisation: this trust is felt on a number of levels, from having the trust of women and girls who use WHAC's services to other professional organisations trusting WHAC with their often vulnerable clients.
- WHAC is unique in Northumberland: it was unanimously reported that WHAC is unique in the services it provides.
- WHAC offers a highly professional service: this is one of the important reasons for the high level of trust awarded WHAC by other organisations.
- WHAC actively contributes to policy development and partnership working across Northumberland: WHAC provides representation on a number of steering groups and local initiatives.
- WHAC has increased local partnership working: WHAC is proactive at developing partnership working arrangements and this includes organising a number of local partnership information and advice days.
- There has been an increase in the number of people accessing family law and debt advice: as a result of the partnership working between DAWN Advice and WHAC, people have accessed legal advice who would not normally have accessed it.
- The Northumberland Care Trust and WHAC have a mutually strong relationship: the Trust has cooperated in project delivery, e.g. in the location of the Health Trainer at WHAC and supporting WHAC clients with their Condition Management Programme, and as a commissioner of services.
- WHAC is important for a number of other organisations and helps them to achieve their objectives: this occurs on a number of levels, for example, by providing a free counselling service, WHAC assists Community Psychiatric Nurses, GPs and other mental health services in the work they do with their clients.

Outcomes

Based on the findings, we can make a series of judgements about the outcomes achieved by WHAC.

WHAC connects hard to engage people with universal services: one agency reported "WHAC is the missing link ... it is the bridge between formal services and people that wouldn't normally walk through the door". It does this because it is an accessible and trustworthy local community service which brings people in. Once involved with WHAC, clients can then access a range of other services such as debt advice, family law advice, further education and health information. In addition to these services, WHAC provides women with support to access other community services. This is not simply a signposting function, in that clients are given contact details, moreover it is a support service and women will be accompanied to where they need to go, if required.

" It keeps you away from the doctors "

Service user

WHAC plays a major public health role by improving the health of its clients: and this happens on a number of levels. A Northumberland Care Trust representative reported that women's health issues were constantly changing and WHAC were in a good position to respond to new health challenges. Clearly, WHAC's most significant health impact is in improving the mental health of women through counselling. However, either at the same time as the counselling period or afterwards, WHAC engages women which then provides the opportunity to discuss specific health issues such as binge drinking, smoking, obesity (diet and exercise) and diabetes. It was also reported by a series of agencies that the clients of WHAC are unlikely to present themselves at routine medical services as in need of mental health treatment. As such WHAC intervenes at an important point in women's lives; with no intervention many of their clients would have presented at critical services (e.g. A&E, Police). This has obvious cost saving implications to local and national services. WHAC's public health role also extends past the counselling service and also includes its education and training and individual support services.

WHAC has led to increased employability of local people: this has occurred through the provision of counselling to individuals with mental health issues, providing a route to engage with people who may not otherwise get involved (creative and fun events and activities), confidence raising and short health courses, bespoke training courses for specific groups and volunteering opportunities. WHAC also brokers support to services which cannot be provided in-house through WHAC and DAWN but which may be vital for a woman to be able to move on. They also provide progression routes through the Northumberland Employability and Work Service to other opportunities for learning, training, volunteering and employment.

WHAC's intervention commonly results in client progression: service users and clients have demonstrated progression on a number of levels such as from counselling services to courses and group work, from isolation to voluntary work and from volunteering to employment. Many of WHAC's users demonstrate this progression which indicates that WHAC is effective at both the engagement and pre-engagement stages and at moving people into more productive roles.

WHAC ensures positive social reproduction and builds social capital: these sociological terms refer to the ability of a group of people to successfully maintain their status as a cohesive group and continue to function in that way and social capital refers to connections within and between social networks which helps make communities more resilient. By impacting positively on women who are often either mothers or heads of household, WHAC is ensuring the family's survival and growth and by implication assisting the local community by providing strong constituents. Similarly, assisting people remain in existing work or find new employment has additional positive impacts on social reproduction.

WHAC improves and adds value to the work of other organisations: there were many instances found during this evaluation where associated organisations reported that WHAC enhances their services. The organisations are diverse and range from social enterprises (who report that they have expanded their services and geographical reach because of WHAC) to public health bodies and employment agencies with associated targets, which WHAC helps them achieve.

Laura, a counselling client*

Laura is 31 years old with three children under five and has experienced a number of crises which led to breakdown. These cumulative crises included an acrimonious divorce, the loss of her job and the loss of her children through Social Service involvement.

Laura was initially brought to WHAC by a Sure Start support worker. WHAC's Volunteer Coordinator worked with Laura, supporting her emotional needs during counselling sessions as well as addressing her additional needs and making appropriate referrals. There were times when Laura was unable to attend WHAC's centre due to financial difficulties and on these occasions WHAC would find a venue within walking distance from Laura's home. Whilst attending WHAC, Laura has seen a solicitor with DAWN Advice for debt and family law advice.

Since coming to WHAC, Laura has found a safe place to live on her own, progressed into paid employment and is looking at obtaining shared residency of her children in the future.

* Not her real name

We conclude the evaluation with the observation that WHAC is in an excellent position to provide key public health and employability services both in South East Northumberland and county-wide (the latter through ongoing expansion via outreach and with a mixed gender service). Indeed, not only is WHAC key to engaging with targeted populations, but they also have a proven track record in good partnership working and delivering commissioned public health and employability services.

For more information on WHAC or to see a copy of the full evaluation, contact:

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For more information on the evaluators, Barefoot Research and Evaluation, see:



www.barefootresearch.org.uk

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