

THE HEAD PROJECT

A case study written by Wearside Women In Need, a registered charity 100934

The HEAD Project is a Hostel and outreach service for male perpetrators of domestic violence. It is funded by the Treasury Invest to Save budget and Hendon New Deal for Communities (Back on the Map).

Summary

Wearside Women In Need has worked in the Domestic Violence sector for nearly 30 years. Radical and positive changes have been made in that time which have enabled greatly improved support and service provision for victims. Multi-agency involvement to tackle this crime, where once non-existent, is now mainstream and mandatory.

However the problem of male violence against female partners remains endemic, poorly understood and under resourced. In the area of child protection domestic violence remains the unremarked leading cause of death, injury, neglect and serious emotional harm to children.

To our agency it became clear that crisis intervention and victim support must be matched by strategic preventative work with male perpetrators if we were to succeed in reducing harm and eradicating domestic violence.

The challenge was to shift societal focus to the perpetrators of the crime, while not diverting resources from, or reducing services to victims of violence.

The Issues and how we Tackled them

For 15 years we have pursued the challenge of strategic preventative work with perpetrators in heterosexual relationships. How do you tackle a problem that has been consistently under-estimated and re-named?

Difficulties are faced in tackling a problem where previously prevalence and impact has been denied and where there are often no common belief systems about the origins of the problem. There is also a great diversity of opinion on how to work successfully with victims and perpetrators.

1. Training was core to the delivery of our aims, an extensive programme promoting a shared theory base and awareness raising has been delivered to thousands of staff in partner agencies across the City. The logic behind such a large training programme is that multi agency commitment to supporting victims and challenging perpetrators could be achieved by a fundamental shift in the knowledge base and culture of both partner agencies and our community.

Different individual champions emerged from agencies to assist in securing funding for the training programme. The principle of Sunderland City Council taking a lead (currently located within the Safer Communities Team) in ensuring this training is delivered, is now firmly established. There are still core difficulties in that accepting concepts delivered in the training sometimes requires participants to re-configure their understanding of the status of men and women.

We have now developed levels of training from 1 to 4 in an attempt to allow more time for understanding of how professionals can change their practice post-

training, to emphasise the impact on children, and to widen our scope to cover B.M.E issues, disability, age and gay and lesbian abuse.

2. In 1995 WWIN worked in partnership with Northumbria Probation (now N.O.M.S) to set up their first court mandated programme of work with domestic violence perpetrators. It also helped establish the principle that work with perpetrators should not be provided without a linked support for service victims.
3. In 2001 WWIN, in partnership with Sure Start (now Children's Centre) established a Violence Intervention Team offering outreach work in a defined locality with perpetrators, their victims, and their children. Although successful the fixed term funding for this team, and the constant re-shaping of the Sure Start remit meant that permanence for the work could not be secured.
4. The lessons learned from these partnership initiatives enabled us to recognise the need for a hostel for perpetrators of domestic violence with a linked outreach service.
5. The City of Sunderland Domestic Violence Forum has a long history of pioneering domestic violence initiatives and so has been very successful in reducing the murder rate for victims and increasing the uptake of services by victims.
6. Pivotal to the success of the project, at this stage have been the City of Sunderland Safer Communities Team, Hendon New Deal for Communities (Back on the Map) and the local media. They identified potential funding and understood and championed the concept as they could see the benefits for the City.
7. At the point we were ready to launch the service Sunderland City Council responded rapidly to our concept of WWIN hiring an equipped bus, and touring the City to gain community support. They funded and facilitated the whole campaign the theme of which was "Tolerating Domestic Violence? Not in our City".

Partner agencies including housing, health and the police backed the campaign. It was also well supported by local politicians. All sectors from churches, to trade unions to small businesses got involved. People working in pubs, taxis, takeaways wore campaign t-shirts and wrist bands.

A strong message was sent out: to victims, that help was available; and to perpetrators this kind of behaviour is unacceptable in the City and would not be tolerated. Two 24 hour helpline numbers were advertised, one for victims and one for perpetrators.

8. As a result of the campaign referrals to the perpetrator service flooded in, which in some ways has slowed the progress of opening the hostel. A small staff team found itself almost overwhelmed by men wanting to engage (with diverse motivations) and agencies wanting our team to work with known perpetrators. For every man we work with equally skilled support has to be offered to his victim, and at every stage risk has to be assessed and where possible mitigated.
9. Daily our caseload presents complex challenges and dilemmas, and while the aims are the same; support and safety for victims, consequences, boundaries

and change for the perpetrators, each service user is an individual requiring a multi agency response.

Everything we develop is flexible, organic and holistic. The people we work with do not live linear lives and service development must reflect this. Services to be successful must be part of the community in which they are based, and be responsive to the community, rather than aiming to impose a prescriptive and rigid template they need to be fluid.

10. 98% of our current caseload involves children as well as adults and working closely with Social Services is imperative. The Perpetrators we are working with can be very broadly divided into 3 categories. Men who are socially included, work in a skilled job and have a long standing partnership. Men who are serial perpetrators, and who have become highly skilled in using manipulation and control techniques. And men who have had chaotic childhoods and whose adults lives are chaotic, with an offending profile and substance misuse issues.

What Could We Have Done Better?

Developing a complex outreach service has slowed the opening of the hostel but has enabled valuable learning about the specifics of when and how men will be offered accommodation. What the mix of residents should be, to enable successful outcomes, and how staff can be supported to effectively engage with sophisticated perpetrators.

We could have been ruthless in refusing referrals for service. As this has unbalanced partnership working, with an emphasis on ironing out problems at practitioner level. We need to focus more on partnership working at the strategic and managerial levels.

Outcomes and Impact

Positive outcomes are already apparent. Despite the client group, this service was always intended to be for victims while delivering services to perpetrators.

Too often perpetrators have been able to convince their victims, and agencies, that they need and want help, and if only that help was available they would be able to change. One major excuse in the lexicon of perpetrator excuses has now been eradicated. Help is available, and if perpetrators don't engage with it, then both agencies and their partners can now put responsibility with the perpetrator and acknowledge that lack of motivation to change is the problem, not lack of service provision.

A national study by Walby (2004), calculated the average cost of a single incident of domestic violence in Sunderland as £945. With annual running costs of £265,000 the perpetrator hostel and outreach service would therefore need to prevent just 280 incidents (approx 0.56% of total incidents) of domestic violence each year to cover its costs and to start saving public money.

In addition, given that we have had no domestic violence murders in Sunderland since 2002, and that each murder is estimated to cost at least £1 million the benefits of investing in preventative services can be firmly evidenced.

Of course reducing human suffering, enabling victims to live free from fear, and allowing children to fulfil their potential should never just be calculated in monetary terms.

Next Steps

The flexibility in funding expenditure afforded us by the Treasury Invest to Save programme has been essential to allowing the project to develop at its own pace.

Having finally located a suitable venue for the hostel, finished the building work, and furnished the project we are now ready for the next, very exciting stage of welcoming our first resident.