

Evaluation Summary for The Way Forward Project

October 2015

Key messages

- 1. The Way Forward is an example of effective, gendered, personalised, preventative approach with young women at risk.**
- 2. Young women using the Way Forward Project have trust and confidence in it.**
- 3. Young women using the Way Forward have high levels of need and distress that are not recognised or do not reach the thresholds for other services.**
- 4. The Way Forward leads us to consider how many fewer women might be in abusive relationships if young women developed resilience and self-esteem through projects such as this; and how many fewer children would be involved in child protection proceedings or in local authority care if young women were supported in their own right and not just in relation to parenting abilities/capabilities.**

Impact of the project on young women

The young women in discussing the ways that the project had helped them emphasized the importance of having emotional support, the ways in which they were listened to and 'heard' and the different style used by the Engagement Worker which was based upon trust and a holistic approach. Reported project impacts related to soft outcomes for many of the young women and the stakeholders.

One young woman discussed her journey through the project, depicting this through the production of a storyboard. When she began working with the project she described herself as experiencing a range of emotions such as being angry, not caring about anything, feeling depressed. She had also experienced the care system and described herself as 'cuckoo' in reference to her own unstable emotional position. She has engaged in risk-taking behaviours such as running away, taking drugs and using alcohol. After support from the Engagement Worker, she described herself as being happy, relaxed and calm which is a very different emotional position. She said

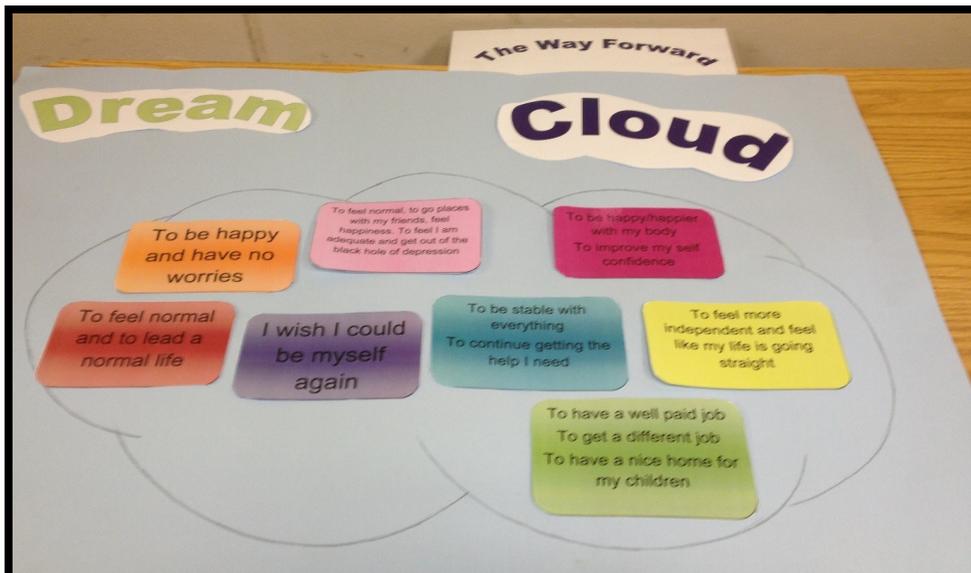
"I had a lot of problems which is like being on a low day so that's why there's a picture of a woman trying. I was low and depressed which led to self-harming a lot more. Now I have short hair, got a new house, new people, new town (demonstrating positive changes)" Young woman

What is this evaluation summary about?

This summary presents some of the findings from an evaluation of The Way Forward conducted by the Centre for Health Promotion Research, Leeds Beckett University. It presents evidence about the project's journey, young women's needs, the outcomes for young women as a result of engagement with the project, the operation of the project, multi-agency working and overall learning from the project.

"I think the holistic approach of the Way Forward and this early intervention with sort of preventative stuff is really, really unique. It's fantastic!"

- Steering Group Member



Young Women produced this dream cloud in which they illustrated the importance of the project from their point of view.

Overall Evaluation Findings

- The Way Forward Project succeeded in identifying and addressing unmet need for 165 young women
- The Way Forward Project provides a good example of preventative, early intervention work with young women from which critical success factors can be identified. These are:
 - ◇ Its person-centred, flexible and adaptable approach
 - ◇ The gendered approach
 - ◇ The skill, commitment, empowerment and supervision/support of the Engagement Worker
 - ◇ The embedding of the project within the voluntary sector based WomenCentre, with a specific holistic ethos, high levels of knowledge and expertise in relation to issues for girls and women, and strong local operational and strategic links.
- The Way Forward has put young women at the heart of the project. It exists solely to offer effective support and encouragement to young women at times of vulnerability.
- The cross agency involvement in the Project was fundamental in maximising reach as well as enabling organisations to learn together about the needs and lives of young women at times of vulnerability as well as the current local service availability and response.
- Listening closely to the experience of young women at a time of need has enabled the Project to understand the impact of the current system on their lives and can clearly see so many missed opportunities. This is an area that may benefit from further focus.

Testimony - Frances

As teenagers and young women, we are constantly made to feel we're inadequate, through the media, our peers and a society where feminism has become a dirty word. And if the people, who are supposed to support us, such as our partners and family, do the same, it can be impossible to see that we're not. That's why I believe it's so important for young women to have places like the women's centre and projects like this one, to be empowered and educated by other women, by people who get it! Especially those of us lacking a female role model ourselves.

And the Way Forward does exactly that. I have been given the tools to see not only what I am capable of but what I have already achieved, just how resilient I am and most importantly how I deserve to be treated.

When I was first asked what made the Way Forward different I didn't know where to start. Before I became involved with the project my life was chaos, I was helpless and desperate. Then the Engagement Worker came along and suddenly it was like somebody had hold of me and they weren't going to let me fall again. I was never judged or told what to do, never pushed and unlike other places I wasn't passed from pillar to post, she was there to stay.

From day one she treated me like an equal human and not a statistic, she cared and went above and beyond the call of duty to ensure my safety. From not letting me off the phone till she knew I was ok, to working late to move me somewhere safe and so much more. That's what makes this project stand out, the people involved. Having somebody who refuses to give up on you no matter how tough it gets, who is your voice when you cannot speak but who never puts words in your mouth

How the Way Forward Works

This model captures the unique aspects of the project in terms of a gendered approach. The young women are at the centre of it. Importantly the project revolves (or fits) around the young women rather than vice versa as indicated by the directional arrows. The nature of the service is that it offers individualised, holistic support at the point of need enabling young women to be (and feel) supported, engaged and empowered. This occurs primarily through the young women's relationship with one of the Engagement Workers. The nature of the relationship is flexible support, building trust, having space and being listened to all of which are of paramount importance. The relationship develops solely on the young women's terms which is another key feature of the project enabling the young women to have control. The key mechanism of the project is that provided Engagement Workers as indicated by the central positioning with the model.

Underpinning the project is the ethos of the WomenCentre approach which provides the values and philosophy of a gendered approach to women's working at its core. This, in turn, supports the multiagency working that is also central to the Way Forward project's effectiveness in working with vulnerable young women.

"If this service wasn't here, without the work that we've done we maybe have more crisis around mental health with more self-harming, more girls displaying risk of behaviour or putting themselves at risk or harm, the crime rate could go up, further sexual exploitation, pregnancies, working girls, all of that and then we hit the criminal justice system."
Engagement Worker

The role of the Engagement Worker

The Engagement Worker's role was highlighted as crucial in relation to the impact of the project upon the young women from their perspective. The intricacies and skills involved in the provision of the Way Forward were clear from the data gathered.

The Engagement Worker described her role as assertive outreach focusing upon interactions with young women to gain understanding of them, and to make them feel involved within decision making in their own lives by allowing them to be heard, working alongside them, being with them and not for them, helping to make a difference. She described the uniqueness of her role within an overall the holistic approach, working closely with internal well-being, self-esteem, identity, self-acceptance and worth as ultimately one of the projects strongest points. This runs alongside some of the more practical work carried out such as advocacy, mediation and building bridges between family members. Stakeholders recognised the importance of this role saying:

"They [Way Forward] were able to give the more detailed work that I wasn't able to do in my current role." Referrer

About the Way Forward

- The Way Forward Project was established by WomenCentre, Halifax in West Yorkshire in 2012.
- The Way Forward Project was a prototype approach with a remit to identify and engage with girls and young women who were slipping between existing offers of service provision and who would otherwise enter adulthood with severe and escalating levels of disadvantage.
- The Project located within and led by WomenCentre, addressed the marginalization of girls and young women, worked with them in ways that statutory agencies were unable to due to service restrictions and enabled them to have a central and empowered place within the project itself.
- The project was overseen by a multi-agency steering group established at the outset, which met every two months. The Steering Group had a core membership of 6 key organisations (Youth Offending Team, WomenCentre, Calderdale Young People's Participation Worker, Calderdale Housing, Branching Out Drugs Service and Young People's Services).
- The Project delivery was undertaken by the Engagement Worker who took referrals, made assessments, provided supportive engagement and links with other agencies for signposting and referral.

What are the implications for policy and practice?

There is growing evidence to support the use of women's centres as a way to improve wellbeing, mental health and simply meeting client needs. Women's community services can support clients in making positive changes to their lives, reducing demands on other service such as police, courts, offender management whilst improving outcomes for their children. The findings from this evaluation support this evidence base. Furthermore, a number of key points emerge for policy and practice:

1. Learning captured by the WomenCentre team in the delivery of the project shows that some of the young women who engage with the project have no obvious referral routes i.e. the young women discuss their needs and their way forward can be identified however there is not an organisation/agency that can provide self-development and emotional support in relation to confidence, self-esteem, reassurance, coping strategies and resilience building. Herein is the value of The Way Forward in providing gender-specific, holistic support to young women in need.
2. Threshold criteria cited by other agencies is a barrier to engaging with young women who clearly have high levels of unmet need. Young women under the remit of The Way Forward were falling through the gaps if they did not meet statutory threshold criteria. Some were also unable to work with other agencies in terms of accessing provision and some were not held by other agencies, which were also perceived negatively by the young women. This reflects that existing service provision is not meeting the current needs of vulnerable young women, and that wider statutory provision is failing in its remit to support vulnerable young women. However, as The Way Forward is a generic project without any threshold criteria it has a much broader scope and thus can meet the gender-specific needs of young women.
3. The critical factor of the qualities of the Engagement Worker are central to the success of the project as she is able to develop trust and provide support in a solution focused approach to meeting the needs of young women, without being too focused upon outcome measures. Thus the distance travelled is considered as more important for young women, rather than specific targets that need to be met. This is related to the overall project approach in which permanence for young women is understood as crucial. This project is based around long term gain and not short term fixes.
4. Learning from the project also shows the importance of the flexibility adopted in relation to the project development and delivery mechanisms. This level of flexibility and adaptability enabled the project to respond to young women's individual need and experiences. The funders of this project were also important in enabling this approach.

How was this evaluation summary produced?

This evaluation summary was developed by Leeds Beckett University. It summarises the results of an evaluation conducted by researchers from the Centre for Health Promotion Research from 2013-2015. The evaluation used a mixed method approach including data from focus group discussions with young women, focus groups and semi-structured interviews with project staff and stakeholders and desk-based analysis of monitoring data. Further evaluation information can be downloaded from <http://www.womencentredworking.com/> and <http://womencentre.org.uk/>

Further Information

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Reference

Warwick-Booth, L., Cross, R., Woodall, J, Kinsella, K., Trigwell, J and Coan S. (2015) The Way Forward Evaluation Summary October 2015. A full report is also available that presents detailed findings from the evaluation and includes details of the methodology and a full reference list.