



PEOPLE'S HEALTH TRUST - ACTIVE COMMUNITIES CASE STUDY

African Community Centre - Pamoja

Introduction

This case study focuses on how the Pamoja¹ project in Swansea was conceived and what it aims to do and achieve, as part of the evaluation of the Active Communities Programme managed by People's Health Trust. The report draws on interviews with the project manager, counsellor, volunteer and participants, and the monitoring information submitted as part of the programme's six monthly review cycle.

About the project

The project secured funding in November 2015, and started delivery in February 2016; the funding is for a period of two years. The project provides group therapy for refugees and asylum seekers who have experienced trauma in their home

country. It offers participants the opportunity to mix with people who have had similar experiences, make friends and reduce their social and emotional isolation. Separate groups are run for women and men. The project will incorporate a range of arts and environmental activities into the group therapy sessions. It is intended that the group will collectively control the focus of activities to some extent.

The project is based in Swansea, which has a high proportion of refugees and asylum seekers, many of whom have only been in the UK for a relatively short time. The project is targeting areas experiencing disadvantage with a higher percentage of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) residents, and the project manager stated that it is on track to recruit the required

number of participants from those areas. A minority of participants are from a wider area, but can be included in People's Health Trust monitoring figures.

The project is managed by the African Community Centre, which was established in October 2004 to support the growing number of African and African Caribbean people living in Swansea and across Wales, by delivering services and activities to promote their health, wellbeing, education, employment and participation in society. Recently, the organisation has started supporting a broader range of minority groups, including Asian and Eastern European people.

This is a new project, based on local need. The organisation identified a need for group therapy to help refugees and asylum seekers overcome trauma experienced in their home country. The African Community Centre has delivered counselling and mental health projects for refugees and asylum seekers before, focused on providing one-to-one counselling and

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supporting clients to gain skills, work placements and volunteering opportunities, and find employment. For example, the Armani project funded by Comic Relief provided one-to-one counselling and some group counselling for women refugees and asylum seekers. The Armani project highlighted the value of group therapy approaches in engaging women².

"So we knew at that point that there was a need for people to meet together and learn more about their community. To share common experiences, because they tend to feel alone; that they are experiencing what they are experiencing on their own, not realising that other people in their very immediate environment are going through very similar issues. So this project was borne out of that." (Project staff)

The Pamoja project was designed to help refugees and asylum seekers to move beyond trauma, and to explore issues that may be stalling them from engaging more in their community. In this sense the project is designed to improve participants' quality of life.



Main findings

- ➔ The project provides a range of ways for refugees and asylum

seekers to contribute to project design and delivery that are proportionate and appropriate. The project is in the early stages but hopes to gradually increase the collective control of participants over time.

- ➔ The project has plugged a gap in local service provision, providing a free course delivered in a format and at a pace that suits its client group.
- ➔ The project is very inclusive, working with refugees and asylum seekers having experienced trauma.
- ➔ Through their engagement with the project, refugees and asylum seekers have improved social links and ties. The group engenders a sense of community belonging and reduces social and emotional isolation.
- ➔ Arts and environment-themed activities can help to engage people from diverse backgrounds in group therapy.

Who is involved?

The project manager and counsellor are paid members of staff. The project manager oversees the project, ensures implementation, manages staff and costs, and monitors activities. The grant will also pay for sessional staff/visiting speakers to deliver arts and environmental sessions where necessary.

Participants are already taking an active role in designing the sessions. The project is in the very early stages, but the intention is for volunteers (who are also refugees and asylum seekers) and project participants to lead some of the sessions, or co-deliver these with sessional staff/visiting speakers.

One volunteer is already helping to facilitate the group therapy sessions.



What opportunities does the project offer?

The Pamoja project is supporting refugees and asylum seekers from diverse backgrounds including Africa, Asia, Syria, and Albania. Participants have generally been in Swansea for between six months and two or three years, although several have been in Swansea for between three and five years. The project has only been running for a month, but is already helping participants to reduce their social and emotional isolation by providing opportunities for refugees and asylum seekers to meet people who have had similar experiences.

"It's a group therapy project for people experiencing issues moving from their home country to here, settling into Swansea, community issues, we explore anything affecting them...most of our clients are refugees or asylum seekers, although it is open to the wider BME communities." (Project staff)

The project delivers separate groups for women and men. This is important as many participants have experienced domestic abuse in their

home country and would not be able to disclose in a mixed group. Some participants also prefer separate groups for religious and cultural reasons.

Initially the group worked on establishing common principles around confidentiality and trust.

"First we talked about how are we going to make this work. Everyone contributed in a discussion about how are we going to make this work for everybody. It's very important to make those ground rules." (Project staff)

"The first thing we talked about was confidentiality because people are from different families and have different problems." (Participant)

"At the beginning it is hard, so [making the rules] helps us feel more comfortable. It is important that it is confidential so you feel you can share with the group." (Participant)

"We have been talking about trust because everyone is from a different country and if we try we can make it friendly...so we talk about respecting each other." (Participant)

Arts and environmental activities will be incorporated into the group therapy, to help participants build their confidence and broaden their horizons. The project is exploring options to include singing, sculpture, film-making and cookery into the therapy sessions. The project aims to empower local people to help design the sessions, for example the men's group are interested in an allotment.

"The hope is other people will have the confidence to meet new challenges...The men want to do something physical, so digging out the weeds, digging out your past, planting something new." (Project staff)

"I would like to do that, then if someone has a problem I can support them." (Participant)

The project is providing opportunities for collective control as one volunteer is helping to facilitate the group therapy. The volunteer discusses the aim of each session with the counsellor in advance. It is hoped that participants will gradually feel empowered to volunteer on the project.

"The hope is that they will go on to be volunteers in the group." (Project staff)



The project staff also hope that collective control will become evident through peer support and befriending as the project evolves.

"Some people want to share their experiences and know they are not alone. So it is an opportunity to share...see that there are other people in their shoes. It is support...in a group there is a whole room of knowledge and experience, you hear other people's stories, we can develop together. People naturally start to take that role of mentor and mentor each other in the group...that opportunity is key to this project." (Project staff)

It is also hoped that participants will develop the confidence to enable collective control by helping to direct the project.

"They will be designing it and taking ownership, taking charge. Being part of something where you are valued, a lot of the people we work with have

experienced a lot of challenges that have made them feel under-valued...so here they will feel valued and be the main contributors." (Project staff)

The project is providing opportunities for participants to develop a sense of community belonging by engaging with the local environment as part of the therapeutic process. Participants commented that this would be beneficial.

"If we are living here we want to see everything. The sea is an infinite place, to have that view, it helps you to think and find peace in your experience. You are up on the hills looking down at the sea and it helps you think you have so many things to do...nature is pure and clean. When I was in my country I was in front of the sea, thinking, thinking...I really want to see the sea being calm and feel the same way." (Participant)

The project also offers personal development opportunities for people to develop their language and communication skills.

"Developing language skills, basic communication skills, they want that opportunity...coming to the group they will speak English in communicating so that improves it...one of the rules is 'don't talk over the other person', so they might be struggling to talk but we will wait and allow them to convey whatever they want to say. You find that people improve their language skills...but also skills in mentoring." (Project staff)

The project is also increasing participants' confidence and independence by enhancing their understanding of local services and amenities. It is hoped that in the longer term this will increase participants' collective control.



"It's helping them to know their community, what services are available and who to go to for what...to build independence in people, that they can take charge of their lives and feel that they can cope. It's developing people's confidence...so they can take ownership of their own livelihood and become community actors...maybe taking leadership roles in the community." (Project staff)

The project also aims to improve participants' quality of life so they can become financially independent if they remain in the UK.

"So they have the language and communication skills, and the confidence to search for jobs. From the type of art and craft work we do they can develop their own businesses or find their own skill...It's also that sense of wellbeing, when people's confidence improves they start to feel like they can go on and develop better relationships and add value to their community. For those that have children...they are better able to support the growth and development of their child." (Project staff)

The project provides a crèche and this enables some women to participate who would not be able to do so otherwise.

The project also has an inter-generational aspect. This helps to develop a common sense of community, as access and isolation issue can be experienced differently by people of different ages.

What has the project achieved?

The project is on target so far, having already engaged 12 women and six men.

"Most of the group are asylum seekers, a few are refugees." (Project staff)

Although in the early stages, the Pamoja project is already demonstrating collective control. For example, the women's group meets on Wednesdays from 12 noon to 1pm and the men's group meets on Thursday from 1pm to 2pm.

"They've chosen that time for themselves. At the launch they had a chat about when they thought would be the best time, such as for Mums with child caring responsibilities." (Project staff)

Collective control was also evident at the launch as participants were consulted on whether they wanted separate women's and men's groups. Participants also highlighted that they would like guest artists to help deliver the sessions, using art and craft work to help open up discussions.

"We want people to feel comfortable so they can take ownership and take a lead." (Project staff)

Participants were encouraged to take collective control in the therapy sessions from the outset.

"Someone will pick an issue and start the conversation...one has started to facilitate. So they share their experiences and support one another to overcome any particular challenge. They share ideas about how they have overcome issues in their own situation, about a similar challenge." (Project staff)

The project is already demonstrating a good level of engagement, both in terms of participants and volunteers. Networking with local organisations has helped to promote the project and generate referrals, such as through the local Mental Health Forum, local authority and ethnic youth support team. The project is therefore complementing other local initiatives to reduce the social and emotional isolation of refugees and asylum seekers. New friendships were already evident.

"It's a good opportunity for me, it's benefited me. If I am sitting here in a group talking that is helping me." (Participant)

"To know I am not the only person experiencing these feelings, different problems but here you find people have the same feelings about life." (Participant)

"You feel some encouragement, to know you are not the only one." (Participant)

The project is helping to break down cultural barriers and develop group empathy, as the group brings together Muslims and Christians.

"One of them told us his story last week and some of them, their chins were on the floor, what he had been through, so it made the others think, 'actually what I've been through, maybe its not so bad'." (Project staff)

"We explored how we are feeling right now and how we were feeling before." (Participant)

This project has already achieved collective control through the provision of peer support, which is empowering, and reducing social and emotional isolation.

"They are already looking at how together, can we impact on the community. Some asylum seekers are

very fearful of the community and don't feel they can integrate...its helping them to face some of these challenges.” (Project staff)

“Already you can see people buddying up...supporting one another, we are already finding that...People are developing friendships and encouraging the other person to join in conversations in the group...that is our top priority...in not feeling alone in their situation and having someone to talk with and befriend, so that kills off isolation that people tend to suffer.” (Project staff)

The project has helped the group to gel and build social ties within the group, which is very important for group therapy.

“[Consistency] is important, before we started we were feeling confused, but now we are used to each other and now we can build our trust.” (Participant)

The group activities help participants increase their confidence through taking collective control, such as agreeing ground rules for the group.

“We established ground rules. There is still some insecurity. But it is through attending the group that all of us are building our confidence because we set the rules.” (Volunteer)

Participants will increasingly be given opportunities to determine the focus of group activities, through collective control. This is a gradual process.

“We find you have to prompt, particularly in the early stages, to bring up the suggestions...They have the opportunity to say if it is of interest. We find they have an overall idea, i.e. they would like to try X or Y activities. We then take the initiative to find out what there is in the community.” (Project staff)

For example, the project manager spoke to the men's group about a local Men in Sheds project and a representative is going to talk to them about it.

“That [the allotment] will be something they can take ownership of and engage with... One participant said ‘Yes! We want something like that’.” (Project staff)

The project also achieves collective control through a volunteer helping to facilitate the group therapy sessions.



What has worked well?

➤ **Recruitment:** The project is well promoted and word of mouth has been the most successful recruitment mechanism to date. The organisation is well connected and distributed leaflets, emails and flyers to its network of local community groups and organisations. Some participants were already familiar with the African Community Centre.

➤ **Launch event:** A lunch was provided at the African Community Centre and the event was well attended by community members and organisations; 15 to 20 people registered their interest in attending the sessions at the event. Ten of these people have become regular attendees. The launch worked well in demonstrating the project approach and ethos.

“It was very interactive, we had things set out on tables and people to show and explain things, to help them understand it and understand the importance of them being involved. We are not leading on it, even though we are facilitating the project, they need to be part of it. The response on the day was really positive, it seemed like people wanted things like that, they wanted that opportunity...they knew this is where they wanted to be.” (Project staff)

➤ **Community engagement activities:** The project is promoted through community events and community members were involved in designing the flyer, demonstrating collective control. The counsellor visited Swansea Bay Asylum Seeker's support group to promote the project, and found this to be a good recruitment channel for the men's group in particular.

➤ **Promoting inclusion:** The volunteer supporting the women's group has a disability as she is partially sighted and is from a similar background to participants, although she has been in the UK for 17 years.

“I am doing a post-graduate in teaching adults and I talked to [the counsellor] and she told me they are doing this group and they have a background of counselling. She told me I am welcome to come, so that's why I came.” (Project staff)

➤ The volunteer helps to provide a positive balance in the group therapy sessions.

“So far it's worked very well. I asked what they hoped to get out of the group at the first session and she [the volunteer] said 'hope'. That was important as the rest of the group had all focused on negative things...She is

a stabilising force in the group....she is one of us, as in she is part of the group so that makes her as approachable as possible, so I think it will be really beneficial having her in the group. She is stepping up.” (Project staff)

“At some stage she or someone else might want to facilitate the group, because they are learning at the same time as expressing themselves, they are learning about counselling, so it’s a learning tool as well...learning counselling skills as well.” (Project staff)

➔ Promoting consistent peer support; the same people are encouraged to attend the groups on a weekly basis. This helps build trust and confidence, and gains participants’ buy-in and commitment to the process of collective control.

“So they are suggesting it, they are designing it...so they can be held to account and the group will be consistent.” (Project staff)

“To share our ideas, if I say something and we can share our ideas and decide all together....If in the future the group is more confident...we can share our ideas about what we want to do in the future...to agree on an idea.” (Participant)

➔ Group therapy: This approach helps to build a sense of community belonging.

“Even though we are all different colours it brings us together like we are family... We get to know one another and then you might see them on the road and think ‘oh, this person belongs to my group’, so it’s that kind of family thing, it brings us together...and we feel safe.” (Participant)

“It’s still very, very new, this is our fourth week of the project. We are all from different backgrounds and cultures, beliefs, everything is very different and exploring those and sharing experiences and lifestyles can be very colourful and an education tool. It can help them to feel in unity with one another.” (Project staff)

➔ Incorporating art and environmental activities into group therapy works well, as it reduces social and emotional isolation.

“Different things come up for different people and we explore the truths through counselling, some people express sympathy, some people express trust...it is therapeutic as someone can express themselves in that, where they are in themselves. When they come to the Art, it helps a lot of people to come out and be happy and be themselves.” (Volunteer)

What are the challenges and how have these been overcome?

➔ Volunteer capacity: Two volunteers are required per group. Ideally participants will progress into volunteering roles. The project was in the very early stages at the time of the visit, but it is hoped that several participants will increase in confidence sufficiently to be able to step-up and fulfil these roles, facilitating the art and craft activities as part of the group therapy.

➔ Engaging male participants: The project established separate groups for women and men. The counsellor noted that the men’s group is proving harder to establish, as women are more

comfortable discussing their problems through group therapy. The project is developing links with a number of grassroots organisations, such as Groundwork, to offer activities that appeal to male refugees and asylum seekers, such as making an allotment. The activities for the men’s group are being informed by suggestions from the men already engaged in the project, demonstrating collective control.

The future

This project has only been running for a month and plans to evolve in line with the plans outlined above; developing in conjunction with the wishes of participants. If successful, it is hoped the group therapy approach will be utilised in future initiatives to support refugees and asylum seekers.

In the longer term it is hoped the project will support the employability of refugees and asylum seekers living in Swansea, many of whom experience legal, language and cultural barriers to accessing work.



Endnotes

¹ ‘Pamoja’ is Swahili for ‘Togetherness’

² The Armani project has been extended for another three years, so participants will be able to be referred to and from the Pamoja project.