



PEOPLE'S HEALTH TRUST - ACTIVE COMMUNITIES CASE STUDY



Signpost - The Sunshine Club

Introduction

This case study focuses on how the Sunshine Club weekly coffee mornings were developed, and what the project aimed 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 staff and beneficiaries, and the monitoring information submitted as part of the programme's six monthly review cycle.

About the project

Signpost is an independent charitable organisation set up in 2004 operating in Colchester, Tendring and Basildon. It helps unemployed people with a wide range of job-related support,

covering one-to-one career guidance, job applications, CVs and interview support, with the aim of helping people to get back into work, training or education.

Signpost secured two years of funding from People's Health Trust under the Active Communities programme to deliver the Sunshine Club weekly coffee mornings between December 2013 and December 2015. The Sunshine Club was a new idea designed to fill a gap that exists in job-related support provision, especially in light of the lack of targeted support for those who are furthest from the labour market and who experience multiple barriers to work. It offers a community-led alternative to more formal job-related support provision and aims to reach unemployed

parents that do not normally engage with mainstream support systems. The idea for the weekly coffee morning came from one of the local residents who recognised that there was a local need for this kind of provision for parents who are struggling to find work.



The Sunshine Club focused on bespoke and informal pre-employment support, which was co-designed by its beneficiaries to help them to gain self-confidence and increase wellbeing, so that they were in a position to move towards employment and to be reintegrated through mainstream support systems.

This was a slightly different approach to any standard job-related support that Signpost or most other providers offered locally at the time. Firstly, Sunshine Club provided targeted support to the most disadvantaged groups in Basildon that would not normally engage in any standard job-related support. Secondly, it recognised through its work with the community that to improve employment opportunities for those affected limited opportunities, there was a real need to address each individual's complex and overlapping needs and provide tailored support to overcome their key barriers to employment.

The project specifically targeted Felmores Estate in Pitsea, a small town near Basildon in south Essex. The area experiences significant disadvantage, and in particular Felmores Estate which is within the most disadvantaged 5% of the country for income, education and employment.

"It's the most disadvantaged area in Basildon." (Project staff)

Main findings

- ➔ Through their engagement with the project, parents have improved social links and support networks. More widely, the project has helped parents to make new friends, improve their self-confidence and wellbeing, and to feel less socially isolated than before.
- ➔ By working with and for the local community, the project has provided parents with an opportunity to contribute to project delivery in a proportionate and appropriate way. As a result parents felt able to have a say in how things are

run and were satisfied with the amount of 'collective control' they had.

- ➔ Building on local contacts and knowledge of the community, the project team has designed a project that clearly meets the needs of parents who are considered to be furthest from the labour market, and in doing so, it has helped parents to develop practical skills and improve the quality of their life.



Who is involved?

Parents who live on Felmores Estate were invited to attend weekly coffee mornings via word of mouth, fliers in the postcode area covered by the project, and advertisements about the project on a local newspaper's online events page.

The project aimed to reach 120 parents and attracted over 130 parents over the life-time of the project. However, only around 12 parents attended regularly each week. The parents were of different ages and backgrounds which reflects the diversity of the local community, which includes Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) and migrant groups.

"It was designed for isolated parents who were local residents... There are a lot of single parents and foster parents. We had a lot of migrant families come who were socially isolated. We had Latvian and Polish people and it really reached out to

them. It gave them somewhere to go, a focus for at least one day of the week." (Project staff)

"The group worked really well and the reason that it was successful was because it was open to everybody." (Beneficiary)

Those that attended regularly came to the Sunshine Club because they enjoyed the practical and supportive nature of the sessions. It gave them a good opportunity to meet other parents and to get to know each other over a cup of coffee in a friendly and non-judgemental environment, and it also had the added benefit of the crèche facilities onsite. The sessions were held at Briscoe Community Centre which was accessible and conveniently located in Felmores near to the local primary schools and nurseries.

The project funding was used to provide a project coordinator to oversee the weekly coffee mornings, and a centre manager to oversee reporting and finances. The funding was also used to pay for things such as the venue hire, volunteer expenses and external speakers to deliver workshops.

What opportunities does the project offer?

Each weekly coffee morning included a one hour workshop which was run by professional tutors and guest speakers. The workshops gave parents the opportunities to develop their creative and practical skills across a range of activities such as self-esteem and self-awareness training, budgeting and managing money, IT skills, cake decorating, sewing, crafts, yoga, meditation, parenting skills, family learning, first aid training, fire safety, and health visits. Alongside the workshops there was also job-related support

available both informally and formally around CV writing, interview skills, and conducting a job search.



What has the project achieved?

Through positive and sustained engagement with the project, parents have benefitted in many ways. Attending the weekly coffee mornings has helped parents to develop greater social links and to feel less isolated (a key programme outcome). They have developed their support networks, including through the formation of new friendships within the group. This has included some isolated single parents or migrant parents new to the area, some of whom have few other means of meeting other people from the community.

"Isolation is also a big factor. Many parents would tell you that they didn't do anything during the week, just take the children to school and come home. This was an opportunity to come along and meet like-minded people. Those that did come got a lot out of it." (Project staff)

"It's about having 'me' time as my whole life revolves around my kids. It's about being able to chat and interact with other parents. As a group we decided what we wanted, so it was solely group run and I found that very supportive. If you have any worries we found that they came out, so we would help and support each other." (Beneficiary)

Some parents also socialised with each other outside of the weekly coffee mornings including evenings out to play bingo and to eat out at local restaurants together. During the school holidays parents also brought their children along to go to local events such as Party in the Park and Kids Kingdom. Parents also felt that the Sunshine Club helped to increase their sense of belonging to the community.

"I met lots of new people and enjoyed coming. You learnt about your own community, but now we mix outside of the group and it's important to have some social integration." (Beneficiary)

The project has also helped parents to gain practical skills and improve the quality of their lives. Parents were more able to socialise and share their views and had become more confident in their ability to learn new skills, to try new things and focus on what they wanted to do in the future, such as getting a job.

"I didn't have any work experience, I was very young when I had my first child, so I've just been a mum, so when I came to me applying for the job, I spoke to [the project coordinator] as I was worried as I'd never worked before. It was really scary. She helped me a lot and I plucked up the courage to apply. I got the job as lunch club assistant at a pre-school. Starting to work gave me more confidence and then I went to college and I'm now a qualified practitioner. That was hard, I found it tiring mentally, but I did it and it was worth it." (Beneficiary)

"We wanted to increase people's self-esteem and to learn something new that they didn't know before, something useful and practical which they can take away. We did six monthly surveys with the parents

which was always a very positive indication of the outcomes being met." (Project staff)

The interviews with the project staff and parents also suggest that the project is demonstrating aspects of collective control (another key programme outcome), through collective action and some control over what activities are offered.

"It was all their ideas, so every week parents would choose what they wanted to do which was relevant to them, so they were running the agenda. They felt that it was their club, they had a voice and they could invite neighbours or friends along. They owned the project and felt empowered to change or suggest things." (Project staff)

Parents were satisfied with the level of control that they had over the project, as they had a say in what type of workshops they wanted and many were eager to suggest new ideas for activities.

"It's very open, it's about personal preferences. We came up with the idea for a session on money, debt, and savings. It benefited so many of us as it got us to think about saving up for the things you want in life. We've also done Purple Genie life coaching, which was really useful. It's learning about what support is available out there and taking it, but also sharing it with others that might benefit from it." (Beneficiary)

Some parents have also helped out and volunteered for the project informally, taking on tasks including setting up the venue, buying refreshments and encouraging other parents to join the Sunshine Club.

"I did the shopping a few times and I helped set up the room. I also encouraged other parents to join, standing on the stall outside getting

people to sign up. I gave leaflets out at work to get the word out about the group.” (Beneficiary)



Some parents have also had the opportunity to run their own workshops, and have shared their expertise on a variety of creative skills such as paper modelling, crochet and flower arranging.

The beneficiaries interviewed said that the open, non-judgmental attitude of the staff was key to helping them to engage in the Sunshine Club. The project was made accessible, friendly and welcoming for parents who would not otherwise engage with standard job-related support, as parents also had the opportunity to socialise and chat with other parents over refreshments. This made the experience more informal and provided much needed peer-support for the parents.

“I found other groups very stigmatising. I didn’t feel like I fit in, but it wasn’t the same here, the people that come along, they were there because they wanted to come along. For me, I felt like I fit in straight way and that gave me comfort. I learnt a lot actually and I’ve come along way. I don’t think for one second that I would be working if it hadn’t been for [the project coordinator, centre manager] and the group itself.” (Beneficiary)

What has worked well?

- ➔ **Collective Support:** Staff attributed the success of the project to listening closely to the views and interests of its beneficiaries. The project encouraged collective control through offering a wide range of activities as requested by the parents, allowing beneficiaries to choose which activities would be most useful and beneficial to them.
- ➔ **Access to other services:** Signpost actively encouraged parents to make use of their other services, including one to one career guidance, job applications, and CVs to interview support etc. The open, non-judgmental attitude of the staff was also key to helping parents to engage with the job-related support side of the project.

What are the challenges and how have these been overcome?

- ➔ **Change of venue:** Initially Signpost thought that changing the venue from Briscoe Community Centre to the local Children’s Centre would help them to attract more parents who were already going to the Children’s Centre. However, it did not work well because many of the parents were uncomfortable with the new venue, due to previous negative experiences of the Children’s Centre. So in response to several parents’ requests, Signpost moved the weekly coffee mornings back to its original venue.

- ➔ **Restrictive target area:** The project targets particular postcode areas based on data drawn from the Indices of Multiple Deprivation as set out by People’s Health Trust. This targeting is specific to particular streets, which has meant the project had to turn some potential beneficiaries away, which could have had an impact on the overall number of regular attendees. Signpost has tried to overcome this by carrying out a recruitment drive to attract more parents.



The future

Although Signpost has not been able to secure additional funding to continue the project, a group of parents decided to start their own weekly coffee morning, which will continue some of the work of the project and all parents have been invited to come along. Parents still requiring additional support have been referred to an informal parents support group in the local area. The Sunshine Club’s Facebook group is still active and some of the parents are planning to have a reunion in 2016.

“I’m gutted that it’s ended. We had a good group. I know other single parents who would really benefit from this as they are really isolated. They would have got to meet other people who are in a very similar situation of being on their own with their little one. So it opens up a social network.” (Beneficiary)