

Evaluating Reaching Out:

the impact and legacy
of the Calderdale
'Reaching Out' Project

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EXECUTIVE

SUMMARY

1. Project **output data** show that Reaching Out had met or exceeded most of its output targets during Years 1 and 2.

2. Data on **referrals** from the end of Year 2 show that more women were referred from the Todmorden area than either Park Ward or Brighouse, Rastrick and Elland. Women tended to be aged either between 25 and 44. There were few referrals for women aged 55 or older. Women were most likely to refer themselves to Reaching Out, with the most frequent referrals from other agencies coming from children's centres or health visitors. Only 5% of referrals came from mental health services.

3. **Low self-esteem** or low confidence was the most common underlying reason for referral.

4. **Poor mental health** certainly seemed to be the most common single causal factor of isolation amongst the women in Todmorden and Brighouse, Rastrick and Elland, although a previous history of **domestic violence** also figured prominently.

5. Women in Park Ward had experienced similar issues but the most immediate reasons for their isolation were cultural, particularly an inability to read or understand **functional English**.

6. For many women, turning to Reaching Out had been a **last resort**.

7. Isolation often articulated itself as **fear**, sometimes, when caused by previous domestic violence, fear of men specifically, but in other cases fear of society more generally. In a small number of cases, fear and desperation had even precipitated suicidal thoughts.

8. Some women suffering from **poor mental health** spoke of Reaching Out as more helpful to them therapeutically than state mental health services, and as their first choice for support as old crises resurfaced or new ones developed.

9. This **role that Reaching Out plays** is recognised by mental health service teams, who sometimes refer their clients to Reaching Out for support, or who use Reaching Out to provide added value to the therapeutic services they are offering.

10. **Travel** emerged as a deterrent preventing women in Todmorden and Brighouse, Rastrick and Elland from using WomenCentre in Halifax.

11. Conversely, **travel** did not emerge as a particular issue in Park Ward, where the barriers discussed were almost wholly concerned with language or culture.

12. **Childcare** emerged as a barrier across all three of the project's localities, but perhaps more strongly in Brighouse, Rastrick and Elland and Park Ward than in Todmorden, where it has been easier to provide crèche facilities.

13. **Women heard about Reaching Out** from a wide range of sources.

14. Typically, the women we spoke with had been part of Reaching Out for periods of between six months and one year, but many had been with the project for 18 months or longer. This was longer than expected and **women's needs for longer term interventions** is a considerable example of the learning that has come from Reaching Out's operations.

15. In general, women found the **one-to-one support** offered by their outreach workers the most valuable aspect of Reaching Out.

16. The experience in Todmorden was rather different, in that the strongest theme was the sense of **community and friendship** achieved through the group, reflecting the fact that Todmorden was the only one of the three sites to have established a cycle of regular group meetings with crèche support by the time of our evaluation.

17. In Park Ward, the one-to-one support clearly had an **advocacy role** in practice, and the outreach worker provided an informal interpretation service.

18. The project's philosophy of allowing women to follow their own **rate of progression** emerged as both a deliberate strategy and one of Reaching Out's greatest success factors.

19. Women did tend to have **goals**, and there was an understanding that a pathway existed through one-to-one support, confidence and confidence building to further training and voluntary work, and from there possibly into paid employment. For many women poor mental health and other disabilities made paid employment unlikely in practice, and the strongest aspiration in Todmorden and Brighouse, Rastrick and Elland was to work towards **volunteering**.

20. **Self-confidence and self-esteem** were the clearest factors in successful progression. The programme's self-confidence courses were highly valued, but there was a feeling that more innovative ways of building confidence might be explored.

21. In Park Ward, **self-confidence and self reliance** were both clearly linked to language and the barriers that presented.

22. Acquiring greater self-confidence and self worth led naturally to developing more **life skills** and the **ability to make positive, informed choices**, two of the BLF target outcomes. In Park Ward, again, life skills and making positive, informed choices were restricted by participants' additional language barriers.

23. The strongest **sense of community** we encountered was in Todmorden, where regular group meetings were well established.

24. Improving **employability** was also a target output of the BLF funding, and one that needed measuring according to the capabilities of the individual woman.

25. **Volunteering** was highly rated as a way through which women can prepare themselves for future employment, although not so clearly in Park Ward, where aspirations seemed to be more directly focused on finding a job.

26. For the women in Todmorden and Brighouse, Rastrick and Elland, vocational aspiration, whether paid or unpaid, were without exception to **caring roles** and professions, particularly working with women who had suffered in similar ways to themselves. This was not the case in Park Ward.

27. **Training** was an important aim for the women, and was the only area where the offering might be broadened. **Confidence courses** were seen as important, and the project's decision to integrate the tutor role into the outreach team was clearly the correct one.

28. Women did suggest **additional courses** in Do It Yourself, Keep Fit, Maths and English GCSEs, Health and Safety and functional English with interpreter support. **Crèche or childcare support** consistently emerged as a need if training was to prove possible for many women.

29. One of the most important assets of Reaching Out was its **'whole life' approach**. Women repeatedly referred to the programme as their 'lifeline.'

30. There was evidence of some determination to either **sustain existing groups** or to develop the confidence to travel to Halifax for support after the project's finish. The project's decision to 'fast track' the formation of a regular group meeting in Brighouse is a sensible one.

31. The fact that the **training courses** were not reliant on attaining target numbers brought constancy to the resource the women were using.

32. Outreach workers were important team members in the **multi-agency support** offered to women and families.

33. Employability amongst the participants was important, but the **absence of pressure to get people into paid work** was a strength of the programme.

34. Project outreach staff would like to see their work **recognised as a specialism** more, perhaps through continuing professional development or a professional qualification.

35. Both outreach workers and volunteers would like to see their **existing skills utilised more fully**.

36. Some staff felt that the **management structure** had hindered project development, and that more of the partnership development and administrative work could have been done before the project's staff started. However, it proved to be a strength that all the team had been involved in developing the project and had a sense of ownership because of this.

37. Outreach workers felt their **roles had been unclear** at first and there was some evidence that this had delayed the establishment of a functioning and trained volunteer team. **Dedicated office space** in the target areas earlier would have been beneficial.

38. The **project team** had been a difficult one to build, and there were tensions between the outreach and volunteer teams. Volunteer support might be built into case plans earlier, and more time for team building should be designed into any future, similar initiatives.

39. The project outreach team and partner agencies both talked positively about their **reciprocal working arrangements**.

40. The outreach workers' close relationships with their clients mean that they are often best placed to **co-ordinate the efforts of partner agencies**.

41. Staff and participants did not feel that the failure of the **counselling service** to materialise had impacted much.

42. Volunteer staff believed they needed to be involved at an **earlier stage of case planning**, and that they sometimes felt under utilised.

43. The **volunteering model** was clearly not as effective as it might have been. Volunteers were well trained, and often had personal experience of isolation and of using WomenCentre services, but would have benefited from earlier clarity about their roles and building them into case plans earlier.

44. **Partner organisations** cover a range of statutory and voluntary agencies, and were emphatic that the loss of Reaching Out's service will leave a gap in their own provision after the end of October.

45. Partners described **working with Reaching Out as a learning curve**, in that they had gained much useful knowledge about socially isolated women through their association with the project.

46. Partners also identified the **needs-led nature of Reaching Out** as one of its main strengths, and doubted that many women would travel to Halifax for support once the project stopped.

47. One or two partners referred to the fact that some of the women they referred to Reaching Out went on to find **paid employment**, further evidence of the project's impact on its participants' employability.

48. Partners felt strongly that they wanted to see Reaching Out **extended to a wider range of localities** within Calderdale, not closed down. They also felt the model could be offered equally well to men who were suffering social isolation or bringing families up on their own.

49. Reaching Out finishing will leave a **gap in the resources** that other agencies can offer their clients in the project areas, something that seems most likely to impact on the project's voluntary sector partners.

INTRODUCTION

The Reaching Out project is a three-year Big Lottery Reaching Communities grant-funded service hosted by WomenCentre in Calderdale, West Yorkshire. The project's aim since its inception in 2007 is to counter the social isolation experienced by a substantial minority of vulnerable women in three different districts of the borough: the market town of Todmorden in the Upper Calder Valley; the Brighouse, Rastrick and Elland area closer to Halifax in the Lower Calder Valley; and the Park Ward district within Halifax itself.

In the first two of these districts, Todmorden, and Brighouse, Rastrick and Elland, the project is targeting predominantly white working class women, although support has also been offered to South Asian women in Elland and Todmorden. In the third locality, the Park Ward district of Halifax, Reaching Out concentrates its efforts on the black and ethnic minority communities, with participants made up primarily of non-English speaking South Asian women.

This report summarises the findings of an evaluation of Reaching Out, conducted by three associates of the Research Toolkit Limited, between March and August 2010. As part of this evaluation, the team spoke with women across the three sites, some of whom were determined to overcome deep-rooted apprehension of the evaluation process to be able to share the profound impact that Reaching Out's package of one-to-one support, group working and training has had on them.

In our evaluation we have interviewed over 20 women whose lives have benefited directly from the intervention of Reaching Out through focus group sessions, one in each of the three target areas. We have also interviewed the project's staff and volunteer workers, through separate focus group sessions, and we have run two meetings dedicated to the project's partner organisations in both the voluntary and statutory sectors. One of these was in Brighouse, the other in Todmorden. We additionally carried out 18 one-to-one interviews, 13 of which we report as individual case studies.

We have collated and analysed the programme's own evaluations and its numerical outcomes as reported through its two end-of-year BLF reports, and its updated outcomes accurate as of July 2010.

Through this we have told the story of the Reaching Out project in terms of its history as an entity facing at times enormous challenges to meet its target outcomes, but also as a collection of individual journeys, which from some points of view express most clearly the daunting hurdles that its participants have to overcome, and how critical Reaching Out has been in helping them to become stronger, more capable and more confident members of society.

News on funding and the effect this has had on the Project Beneficiaries, Staff, Volunteers and Partners throughout our evaluation

At the outset of this evaluation WomenCentre was intending to use its outcomes as supporting evidence for further funding applications, perhaps to the Big Lottery Fund (BLF) for a redesigned project, a Reaching Out Mark II, or to other sources of support. Due to the change in Government, the economic climate and the impact of national spending cuts on local partners to make decisions about funding it became clear that the Big Lottery Fund (BLF) Reaching Communities Grant would be the only realistic source for continuation funding.

During the summer of 2010 it was confirmed by BLF that further funding for Reaching Out to continue in Calderdale in its current form would not be available. The project therefore closed at the end of October 2010.

WomenCentre's acquisition of its parallel resource in Huddersfield has opened the possibility of a bid for BLF funding for a similar programme of support in Kirklees, taking into account the lessons learnt from Calderdale's Reaching Out project.

The news about the service ending impacted on our evaluation, on the women who have benefited from the programme so far, and on the staff, paid and unpaid, who make the project work. It has also impacted on the statutory and voluntary sector partners who work with Reaching Out, and who count Reaching Out as part of their offering to socially isolated or otherwise vulnerable women.

The impact of the Reaching Out project in Todmorden has been so highly valued by local partners that the Council's Family Services and Outreach Team have offered a small amount of funding to enable the service in Todmorden to continue supporting women with children until March 31 2011.

The early phases of our evaluation seemed to be uncovering evidence of optimism and confidence about the future. We spoke with women who had histories of poor mental health, women who had fled from domestic violence, not just from partners but occasionally from other family members as well, and who in many cases lacked the confidence even to leave their own homes, and they talked to us about the strength and community they were finding through Reaching Out. The women we talked to seemed sure of the road they were travelling, never mind how long it might take them to achieve the goals they had set themselves.

The project's three outreach workers had forewarned women in their respective areas of the possibility that Reaching Out might not be able to continue, but the impression we gained was that few, if any, had taken this threat to heart.

After the news of the project's impending closure became official, this changed. The women we spoke to accepted the inevitability of the programme drawing to an end, and we began to encounter fear and misgiving where before we had met confidence and aspiration. Partner organisations in particular expressed concerns about the gaps that would be left in their own provision once Reaching Out no longer existed, and volunteer workers lamented the fact they would need to find different WomenCentre services to support.

The biggest impact of Reaching Out ending will, of course, be on the many women who have benefited from using the resources it offers, and on the many women who need Reaching Out, either now or in the future, but who have yet to be able to access it. "We are on our own, isolated, we don't even speak English, we need help," one South Asian woman in Halifax told us, through an interpreter. "You'd think, what was the point of all that, if they're going to take it away," another woman, this time in Brighouse, asked.

Evaluation method

In this evaluation we have we have told the story of Reaching Out through the experiences of the women who have benefited most from its services, its participants themselves. We conducted three focus group sessions which were attended by a total of 24 women. One focus group was held in each of the three target localities: Todmorden Community College, Waring Green Community Centre in Brighouse, and at The Queen's Road Neighbourhood Centre in Park Ward, Halifax.

The women we spoke with were of a range of different ages at all three focus groups, although ethnicity was polarised, with exclusively white attendees in Todmorden and Brighouse, and exclusively South Asian attendees in Park Ward.

We supplemented these focus groups with one-to-one interviews to animate our data reporting with individual stories. We used an appreciative approach to these interviews, in which the evaluator takes the role of critical friend, something that needed a constructive relationship between ourselves as evaluators and the women we were working with.

Further focus groups were held with the project's other key stakeholders – the staff who make it work, the volunteers who offer support, and two focus groups with project partner organisations, one in Todmorden and one in Brighouse.

There were some sensitive issues to explore with participants, who were predominantly vulnerable women, and the evaluation team members were given enhanced CRB clearance before our work began. We were also careful to make sure the female member of our team was at all participant sessions, and was available to conduct one-to-one interviews should women feel uncomfortable talking to a male researcher.

In practice, our team did not find gender a particular issue, and only a minority of one-to-one subjects asked for a female interviewer.

Data coding was left open during the analysis to capture emerging themes, and instruments developed iteratively as the evaluation progressed. Data were analysed using qualitative data analysis software, and are reported under four distinct

headings: the participants themselves; the project's staff; its volunteer workers; and Reaching Out's partners.

We report the project's quantitative outcomes separately, using the end of Year1 and 2 BLF reports and the project's own data, updated to July 2010. Our report concludes with our main research findings.

QUANTITATIVE

OUTCOMES

Reaching Out's proposal to the Big Lottery Fund in February 2007 included annual and cumulative end of project targets across five key outcomes. These were:

1. 500 women over the life of the Project, with particular barriers to access to make more positive and informed choices in their lives. 50 community based groups to assist and benefit from project delivery.

2. Flexible programme of training and volunteering opportunities provided to 250 women over the lifetime of the Project to develop their skills and improve their employability.

3. A total of 300 women over the lifetime of the Project to develop life skills and confidence to increase their personal independence and engage in wider activities.

4. A total of 300 socially excluded and isolated women over the life of the Project to become less isolated.

5. A total of 300 women to have improvements in their social well-being and psychological health over the lifetime of the Project.

These outcomes were designed to resonate with the BLF Reaching Communities Grant Programme outcomes. These are:

Outcome 1: People having better life chances

Outcome 2: Stronger communities, with more active citizens, working together to tackle problems

Outcome 4: Healthier and more active people and communities.

In practice, Reaching Out has met or exceeded most of its target outcomes, which are summarised in the table below.

	Year 1			Year 2			Year 3			TOTAL	Total
	Target	Actual	% var +/-)	Target	Actual	% var +/-)	Target	Actual	% var +/-)	Target	Actual
Outcome 1											
Women able to make more informed choices	150	159	6	250	257	2.8	100	176	76	500	592
Community group engagements	20	20+	0	30	30+	0	10	10	0	60	60
Outcome 2											
Women having access to training	60	50+	(16.7)	60	64+	6.7	60	77	28	180	191
Women taking up volunteering opportunities	15	15	0	20	18	(10)	15	10 *	(33)	50	43
Outcome 3											
Women developing life skills	100	75+	(25)	100	100+	0	100	104	4	300	279
Outcome 4											
Women receiving counselling	30	10	(66.7)	20	22	10	15	9	(40)	45	41
Women receiving one-to-one and group support	80	129	61.25	120	202	68	40	101	152.5	240	432
Outcome 5											
Women experiencing less isolation	80	81	1.25	120	202	68	100	101	1	300	383

* (23 were given help to access voluntary opportunities)

One of the few exceptions to this was in Year 1, where the number of women accessing training, at 50, fell 10 short of the target output of 60 but this was compensated for during Years 2 and 3, when the project exceeded its target output.

In Year 1 also, the number of women who could be identified as having improved their life skills through the project, at 75, was 25% short of the Year 1 target of 100. In Year 2 this had reversed, and in both Years 2 and 3 the project attained its target output of 100 women each year.

There was a shortfall in the number of women taking up volunteering opportunities in Years 2 and 3. This was mainly due to the complexity of needs the women who were being supported faced. It took many months of working with most women to enable them to overcome barriers such as low confidence and self-esteem. In Year 3 23 women were offered access to volunteering opportunities but only 10 of these took the opportunities up.

The only real targets missed were those for counselling, reflecting the fact that the planned outreach counselling service could not be developed for a variety of reasons. In all 3 years the number of women receiving one-to-one support, which the women themselves identified as meeting many of their counselling needs during our evaluation, greatly exceeded its target outputs.

Referral sources

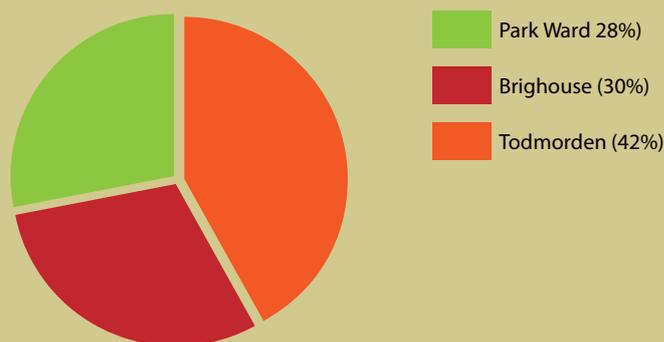
Data are available from the Reaching Out project itself for Year 2 referrals, which give an interesting profile of the women who have used Reaching Out's services during this period. These data show which project locality the referral came from, the age ranges of the women referred, the referral source, and the reason for the referral.

Project locality (202 referrals)

42% (190) from Todmorden (Upper Calder Valley)

30% (132) from Brighouse, Rastrick and Elland (Lower Calder Valley)

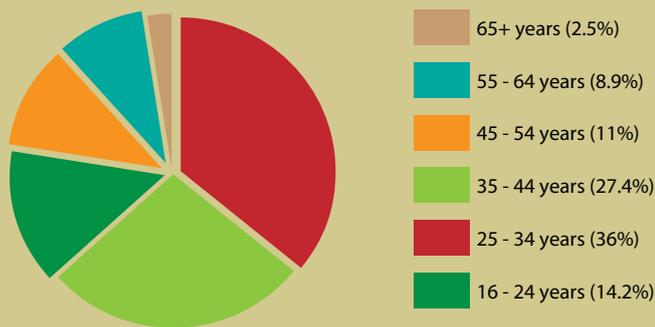
28% (127) from West Central Halifax (Park Ward)



The level of referral to the project from Todmorden based organisations and individuals is noticeably higher than that from either Brighouse, Rastrick or Elland, and this was echoed by the fact that the number of organisations attending the Todmorden partner focus group was over twice that for the total from both Park Ward and Brighouse, Rastrick and Elland combined.

Age range (recorded for 325 women only)

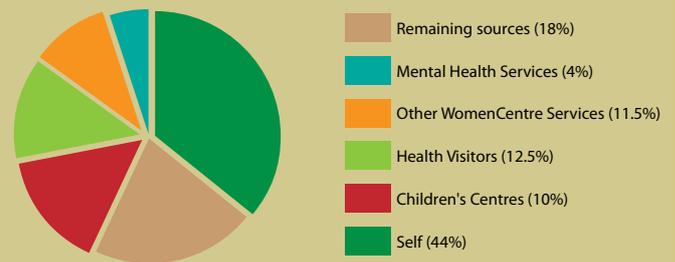
14.2% (46) 16-24 years
 36% (117) 25-34 years
 27.4% (89) 34-44 years
 11% (36) 45-54 years
 8.9% (29) 55-64 years
 2.5% (8) 65+ years



The largest number of referrals were in the 25 to 34 year age range, with 35 to 44 following a close second. The third highest range was 16 to 24 years, with numbers tailing off rapidly above 55 years old.

Sources of referral (from 43 different sources over the 3 years of service)

44% (198) self referral
 10% (45) from Children's Centres and Family Services
 12.5% (56) from Health Visitors
 11.5% (51) from other WomenCentre Services
 4% (17) from Mental Health Services
 18% (82) from the remaining 19 sources



Most referrals were by the women themselves (44%), followed by health visitors (12.5%).

Reasons for referral

36% (162) low self esteem and loss of confidence

37% (168) access to training/ courses

25% (113) isolation

21% (96) mental health and well-being related issues – eg depression, stress

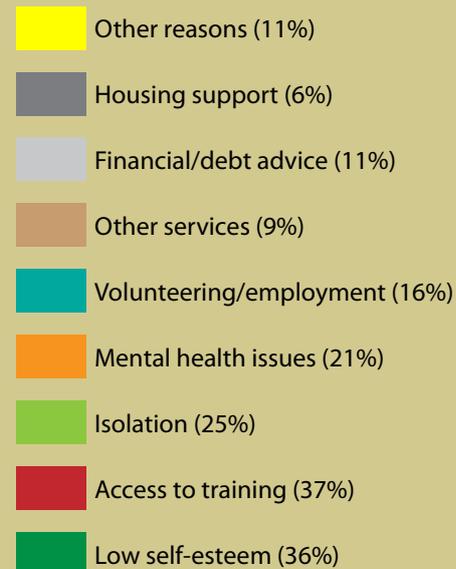
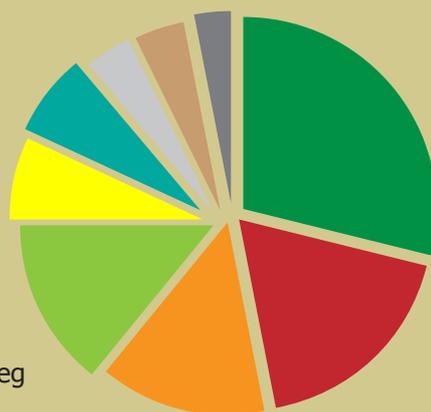
16% (73) access to volunteering, employment or careers advice

9% (39) access to other services

11% (48) support with finances – eg benefit entitlement, advice re: debt

6% (27) support with housing problems

11% (48) for other reasons – eg counselling, literacy, bereavement, family issues



Although low self-esteem and confidence and access to training are the two most prominent reasons for referrals during Year 2 of the project, we would add the caveat that, in terms of our evaluation, it proved difficult to disentangle low self-esteem from isolation or poor mental health, and that a desire to access training may in itself reflect low self-esteem, particularly given the emphasis on confidence building courses through Reaching Out.

THE

EVALUATION

Reaching Out is a complex, multi-faceted programme of support, and although we have focused our exploration of the key evaluation themes on the perspectives of the project's participants, we have also separately reported the experiences of the programme's staff, volunteers and partners.

Participants

Women participating in Reaching Out were interviewed through both group and one-to-one sessions in all three of the project's target locations (Todmorden, Brighouse including Rastrick and Elland, and Park Ward in Halifax).

Interviewers used this as an opportunity to facilitate these women to tell the story of their journey through Reaching Out; why had they needed its support in the first place; how did they find out about Reaching Out; and what were their experiences as they passed through the programme? We also encouraged the women we spoke with to reflect on how their participation in Reaching Out has reshaped their aspirations and hopes for the future, if at all.

We asked women about the programme's target outcomes, including its impact on their ability to make more informed choices, their access to training through Reaching Out, their feelings about both paid and voluntary work, the impact of the project on their life skills, the one-to-one support they had received, and, most critically, the extent to which their work with Reaching Out has reduced their feelings of isolation.

In the interests of managing the considerable quantities of data generated by these interviews we have reported them under three distinct headings:

- Participant Journeys
- Reaching Out as an intervention
- The Future without Reaching Out.

Participant journeys

Isolation

A sense of isolation from and fear of society emerged as a clear theme from our discussions with women at all three sites. The causes of this isolation varied, with poor mental health and past experience of domestic violence and/or childhood abuse figuring most prominently. In some cases there were additionally environmental issues, such as a reluctance or inability to face travel, and to an extent the need for childcare support.

The experiences discussed with South Asian women in Park Ward were rather different, in that although there was evidence of poor mental health and other causal factors shared in common with women in Todmorden and Brighouse, the primary cause of isolation was language. Few of the women we spoke with were able to speak or read English.

Whatever the causes of isolation for individual women, one theme that emerged clearly was that their decision to contact Reaching Out, or their receptiveness when contacted by the project's staff, were often driven by feelings of desperation.

"I was really rock bottom," one woman told us, "because I got left seven months pregnant, with a house I was losing, I had two children with ADHD, I thought 'I've got to get somebody to talk to.'"

Another woman agreed. "I just reached rock bottom and I didn't know where else to turn," she said.

Fear

Isolation as a theme sometimes came hand in hand with fear of society. In some cases the fear was of men, the result of previous domestic violence and abuse. "I'm being serious, I'm frightened of men," one woman told us, describing how hard she had found it to attend a group session with male researches present, "But because of all the work they've done for me, I was determined to see it through, panic attacks or no panic attacks." The same woman reported that eighteen months previously she would not have

been able to achieve this, which she saw as a measure of the programme's success. Other women said that the reason they liked Reaching Out and the WomenCentre, was that both gave them the opportunity to socialise without men present.

In other cases the fear is about the pressures of normal living. "I used to be a secretary, but the thought of going back to an office terrifies me," one woman told us.

With one or two of the women we spoke to fear and desperation were so extreme when they joined Reaching Out that they were unsure of the value of living at all. "I was scared of everything,"

one woman confided, "Once, I got that far down I didn't want to be around any more."

A previous history of experiencing domestic violence was discussed by a number of people as a cause of apprehension and lack of confidence. In some cases domestic violence had prompted participants to contact WomenCentre in the first place.

"Originally through domestic violence," one woman said when asked how she heard about Reaching Out in the first place, "I thought I could do it on my own, but I couldn't."

In other cases WomenCentre took the initiative and contacted the victim directly, showing a proactivity that emerged as a theme as our evaluation progressed. "The first time WomenCentre contacted me was because of domestic violence," one woman told us.

Case study Elsie, Reaching Out participant

Elsie was introduced to Reaching Out in Todmorden after experiencing a recurrence of anxiety and depression. Her doctor gave her a leaflet advertising an open day for the Reaching Out service, which Elsie went to, after which she joined the programme's confidence building courses.

"I didn't have a lot of confidence because my family didn't really care, in fact they disowned me when I got ill," she said, "They were different with me, and they still are, because they don't understand."

Elsie suffered from tinnitus as well as depression, which made life unbearable. "I've got anxiety and depression, and what set it off was I've got really bad tinnitus," she said, "That set it off, feeling scared all the time. I wouldn't go out. I was frightened of people, of talking to people, so I just stayed in."

When the Thursday group at Todmorden became quite large, Elsie was happy to join the smaller, break-away Tuesday sessions that were organised, although she still goes to the Thursday sessions as well. "If I've had a bad week I know I've got Thursday to look forward to, and if I'm feeling down I can have a cry or get a hug, which I don't get from my family," she said, "if this group finished I think I'd just go back into myself."

Elsie's main hope for the future is to recover her confidence. "I was really a confident person," she said, "nothing phased me at all, but the least little thing seems big now."

What of the future without Reaching Out? "I don't now, I just don't know," she told us, "there's nowhere else to go. I'd feel lost without it and I think I would go back, backwards instead of forwards."

Mental health and wellbeing

Poor mental health emerged as one of the clearest causes of isolation amongst the women we spoke with, sometimes precipitating isolation from their own family members. “It’s taboo to mention mental illness in my family,” one woman said. For others, the isolation caused by poor mental health was more general. “People think that, because you’ve got a mental illness, you’re wrong in the head,” another woman at the same session told us.

For the women we spoke to, Reaching Out provided a resource that mental health services could not match. “I went to the psychiatrist, you know, through all the court thing, and I told a psychiatrist everything, but when I came out...I didn’t feel they’d helped me, I felt worse” one woman who had been accused of an offence said, “But when I came here it was a right tonic.”

The feelings of crisis can travel with women through Reaching Out, where the support offered by the project’s outreach workers emerges as critical. “I just didn’t know where to turn,” one woman remembered, “I was waiting outside the Thursday morning session, waiting for [Gail] to come, because I just didn’t know where else to turn. I felt so awful. I didn’t know what was going on. I was having a breakdown.”

Another woman who had felt suicidal when she joined Reaching Out reiterated this. “I’m not saying I don’t get dark days still,” she said, “because I do, you know, you get dips.”

The value of Reaching Out’s support is recognised by mental health services, something that is explored more later. One woman told us, “I tried taking an overdose, so I then had to see a counsellor and the counsellor recommended WomenCentre.”

Travel

The restrictions of travel and childcare needs compounded isolation for many of the women we talked to. Travel in particular emerged as a powerful deterrent for women considering attending courses or other activities at WomenCentre in Halifax, underlining the importance that participants attached to a locally delivered programme. “I wouldn’t dare travel to Halifax” one woman in Brighthouse said, with others complaining of the cost of catching the bus there, which would be £3.20 for a return fare.

The fact that the programme had countered this through its outreach initiatives was valued highly. “It makes you feel a little bit important, for them to come here,” one participant in Todmorden said, a sentiment echoed by another woman at the same focus group: “That’s what’s nice about the Reaching Out team, they’ve reached out to us. We wouldn’t have a service had it been in Halifax.”

Language and Culture

With the women we spoke to in Park Ward, the experience was rather different. There were still barriers that deterred them from travelling the comparatively short distance to WomenCentre, but these were cultural rather than physical. “It’s very difficult, very difficult,” one woman said, and another commented “If we need to go to the Citizen’s Advice Bureau, how can we go? There are people working there who don’t know our language.”

Specifically in Park Ward, language barriers were identified as one of the key causes of isolation. Most of the women we spoke to were Urdu or Hindi speakers, and few had mastered English. Our conversations were through an interpreter, and the importance of the outreach worker as an individual source of help quickly became clear. “We don’t speak English, and we can’t communicate with anybody else, so apart from Julie nobody can help us,” one woman complained, while another said “We can’t make a telephone call, we can’t read or speak English.”

Childcare

Childcare was identified both as a cause of isolation, and as a barrier to taking part in Reaching Out's activities. This in itself compounds isolation. "You'd get to meet other people, you'd get to meet other parents," one young mother in Brighouse said, "childcare's a big problem, even if you do want to do courses, childcare's a big problem." Others made the same point. "For me, to go on courses and stuff I'd need someone to watch my baby," one woman said.

The issue of childcare emerged more clearly in Brighouse and Park Ward than it did in Todmorden, reflecting the fact that since Christmas the group there has had access to a crèche, and that it has proved easier in general to identify suitable training venues with crèche facilities in Todmorden than in the other localities throughout the project's lifetime.

Case study Gail, Outreach Worker, Todmorden

Originally a nursery nurse, Gail worked with both Sure Start and Home Start in the voluntary sector before joining Reaching Out at the beginning of the project three years ago.

"I had a fantastic experience working for Home Start as a co-ordinator for four years," she said, "I left because of funding issues, moved into the statutory sector in Sure Start, which I didn't feel suited me as well, so was looking for something, and this was completely right up my street."



Gail's work covers the Todmorden area, including Cornholme, Walsden and Portsmouth, and she initially works with women on a one-to-one basis for as long as six months when they join Reaching Out. "I have seen somebody in a one-to-one capacity for longer than that, but most people will feed into the group after a while."

Although isolation is the biggest issue for the women who join the group, Gail has found recruiting women to Reaching Out to be relatively straightforward. "I haven't in all honesty found it difficult," she said, "if I know that's what they want to do, because if they want to join the group then it's just a matter of their confidence, and trusting me and things like that, so it will work even if it's slow."

"If the woman doesn't want the group, then that's her choice completely."

Gail feels that childcare could be a major factor when Reaching Out comes to an end. "With the group that started first and who are now their own group, I think there's a good chance of their sustainability. They don't have to pay for a room, none of them have got children under five," she said, "Todmorden is a good venue for free rooms if they lose the room that they're meeting in now." However, she felt that the other group may find it harder. "I'd say their main barrier is children under five rather than rooms or their own confidence."

Reaching Out as an intervention

How women heard of Reaching Out

Although a considerable number of women are referred to Reaching Out by the programme's partners, which we explore in greater depth later, many of the women we talked to had discovered the programme independently, and described a wide ranging array of sources for this information. These included housing associations, doctors, midwives, psychologists, churches, health visitors and project launch events.

Participant activities

The women we spoke to had been supported by Reaching Out for periods ranging from a few weeks to the two and a half years of the programme's existence. There was a little confusion at times over whether we meant Reaching Out or WomenCentre more generally, with two women in Park Ward reporting that they had been coming to Reaching Out's activities for six and four years respectively, considerably longer than the programme has been in existence.

Typically, women had been taking part in Reaching Out for a period of between six months and one year. We feel that in Todmorden and Brighouse, when we asked how long people had been taking part in Reaching Out, women described their period of association with the project, and recognised their outreach workers as sources of support that were available from within that project.

In Park Ward, however, women tended to describe their period with Julie, the outreach worker, "I've been with Julie for four years" being a typical comment. This theme, that for the women in Park Ward the outreach worker was the project, became stronger as the evaluation progressed.

We asked women about the specific activities they had taken part in during their period with Reaching Out, and the impact, beneficial or otherwise, of these activities on them.

Although it proved impossible to establish the programme's planned outreach counselling service, where participants were referred on to other locality based counselling services, they were complementary about their value. More typically, women valued their one-to-one support from outreach workers as effectively offering the same benefits that they would have received from counselling, and the one-to-one support certainly emerged as the most important aspect of Reaching Out's offering.

The responses we received when we asked about one-to-one support did, however, vary between the three sites. In Todmorden, where the Reaching Out model has effectively attained maturity, one-to-one support is seen as a crucial part of the women's journeys to membership of the Thursday and Tuesday group sessions. Enthusiasm for the one-to-one support was balanced to an extent by an equal sense of enthusiasm for the regular group meetings.

In Brighouse, regular group meetings had not started at the time of our evaluation, although they were well established by the end of the evaluation, and perhaps not surprisingly the one-to-one support was the element of Reaching Out that participants found most valuable. Nonetheless, the women we spoke with were looking forward to a regular meeting. Women spoke also of the drop in sessions available in Brighouse, where they felt there were not enough people at any one time to be able to organise group activities.

In Park Ward the relationship between individual women and their outreach worker seemed to be at its strongest, and although women might come together around specific events or activities, there was no sense in which people particularly wanted a regular group meeting. If one were organised, however, women would attend so long as Julie, their outreach worker, asked them to. "We come here whenever she calls us," one woman said, summarising the general feeling in the focus group there. This fact notwithstanding, the two elements of Reaching Out that came through repeatedly as the most valuable were support in functional English, and individuals' relationships with the outreach worker.

Participant progression

One of the many attractions of Reaching Out for the women we spoke with was the fact that the provision offered to them could be tailored around their individual needs, something that the outreach workers themselves later discussed as one of the project's great strengths. "What people get [from Reaching Out] depends upon what they need," one member of the project team told us.

The personalised nature of Reaching Out at all three sites was seen by participants as a critical aspect of the programme's philosophy, and one that the women we talked to identified with its non-judgmental nature. "I do my own thing," one woman said to us, "Yes, definitely, being able to be me rather than being judged." Women saw this low-key approach as one of the things that differentiated Reaching Out from other provision, where there can be pressure to achieve numerical results. The project's staff affirmed that this low pressure approach was deliberate. "We didn't want to appear like social workers," one member of the project team told us, "we wanted everyone to feel that if they didn't feel like coming that was okay."

Just as the resources offered to individual women are tailored to their specific needs, so the rate of progression is itself also the product of women's individual capabilities, with some people remaining with the programme longer than others. Many of the women we spoke with carried enormous burdens with them, and needed this non-judgmental and 'hands off' approach to be able to make progress against their own confidence levels and capabilities at all. "There are so many people so ready to judge you," one woman in Brighouse told us, "whether because you've been through domestic violence, or mental health, or whatever, you know, you've been on benefits for a long time."

One of the key findings of this evaluation is that for some women, progression to a point where aspiring to meet some of the project's outcome targets is a slow and demanding process that requires great patience, understanding and reassurances from Reaching Out's staff and volunteers. "Every week it gets better," one participant said, "obviously, you get weeks where you get knocked back down again, and they are there to support you yet again, pick you up and tell you that you are not on your own, there are other people out there and you will get through it."

The women we spoke to had a wide range of progression goals, although none had formalised these as a personal development plan. Forward plans ranged from clear pathways through training and volunteering and on to employment at one extreme, to simply being able to participate in the project at all at the other.

Women did, understandably, tend to articulate their goals in terms of identifiable steps. "I've done the group for just over six months," one woman in Todmorden told us, "and I think that, because of the group, I am more capable of going on to that next step, and seeking out what training or volunteering I now want to do."

For others, poor mental health makes aspiration to training or employment difficult to attain. "I don't like not working, I've had quite high pressured jobs" a participant told us, "but then that's in the nature of my illness, sometimes I'm great and at others I'm not."

"My youngest starts nursery school next year, and I want to be working for them, but I've been told I won't, because if I can't get to the group on time I'm not going to manage with work."

One woman, a previous victim of domestic violence, measured her progress in terms of her ability to be in the same room as our male researchers. “Eighteen months ago I wouldn’t have even been in the same room,” she said, “I would not have spoken to you. I would not have sat in here with you in the room. But I’ve done it.” The slow rate of progress for some participants, with frequent relapses and crises, brings with it apprehension about the future once the programme finishes. “It’s been such slow progress for me, and the thought of it ending in October, well, my goals won’t be reached,” one woman in Todmorden complained, “The lack of engagement with me would definitely mean I’d take a step back.”

Participant self-confidence

For the participants we worked with, progression was inexorably linked with self-confidence and self-esteem. When we asked women at all three groups what it was they needed to prepare themselves for the next stage of their journey, the answer was generally ‘confidence,’ with the caveat that in Park Ward confidence itself was closely linked with the ability to read and understand the English language.

Case study Sharon, Reaching Out participant

A teenage parent herself, Sharon spent much of her childhood growing up through the care system in children’s homes or with foster parents. “I didn’t have a family but I’ve had some fantastic foster parents that have helped me,” she said.

Sharon’s natural family had a history of mental illness. “My mother had mental health issues and had a nervous breakdown, totally lost her children because there wasn’t this sort of thing back then,” she said, referring to Reaching Out.

Originally from Lancashire, Sharon moved to Todmorden with her children a few years ago. After being introduced to the project outreach worker, Sharon started coming to the regular group meetings. “I didn’t speak for quite a long time,” she recalled, “I didn’t want to be judged when I first started, I didn’t know whether I would be or not because it was a new situation for me.

“If I come here and burst into tears and don’t say a word they understand that I’m really struggling at the moment, they don’t press me, they won’t hassle me.”

Sharon thinks of Reaching Out as her family. “Yes, it’s become my rock,” she said, “my support network, my family. If I didn’t have it I dare say that at the moment I would slip back into hiding.”

Looking to the future, Sharon wants to become a helper herself. “I want to put something back, I want to go full circle,” she told us, “helping other people who are like me, who are sat on their own thinking ‘Why am I here?’”

Although Sharon has several children of her own, she would like to become a foster parent one day. The confidence she has gained from Reaching Out has already improved the lives of her own children. “My kids get taken out more, because I’m not so frightened of people or society,” she said, “This has shown me, not everyone is scary, not everyone will dupe you, not everyone will hurt you.”

At its most basic level, women in Todmorden found that membership of the group brought confidence in itself. “Since I’ve been coming, I’ve felt right empowered,” one said. “I think it’s coming to groups like this,” another woman told us, “because it gives you the confidence to do other things. It’s given me confidence.”

Self-confidence was partly defined by women as this sense of empowerment, but also as self-worth. “To reaffirm to yourself that you are a worthwhile person,” one participant explained, “and that you also deserve respect, that you’re not like something on the floor.”

The programme’s emphasis on building its participants’ confidence as the key to progressing to meet other goals was vindicated by our evaluation, and for the vast majority of the women who we spoke with, confidence was the cornerstone of all their hopes and future plans.

In Park Ward there was a clear acknowledgement that confidence was necessary to aim for greater self reliance, which formed one of the participants’ most frequently mentioned hopes, but again a sense in which this was linked to language as much as to anything else. “I want to be able to rely on myself,” one woman told us, “I want to be able to read, do things and help myself.” For the women we spoke with, a central element of regaining their self-confidence was countering the stigmatisation both of their isolation, which was often the result of poor mental health, but also of their need for support. “You do tend to blame yourself for whatever situation you’ve been in,” one woman said, “you do blame yourself.”

For women in Todmorden, the fact that the weekly sessions take place in the College is an asset in terms of countering any stigmatisation women might be feeling. “I say, ‘I’m going to college,’” one woman there told us, with others expressing similar feelings. “I don’t want to tell anyone about the group, that’s why I say I’m going to college,” another agreed.

There was evidence, however, that as women’s confidence grew, so their concerns about this waned. “I used to say I was going to college,” one woman confided, “and then when I’d been a few times, I said I was going to a women’s group, a friendly group.”

Improved Life Skills and Informed Choices

This journey from isolation, through stigmatisation and on to confidence and self-worth was described by most of the women we talked to, and for many it led naturally to the life skills and ability to make positive, informed choices that make up the backbone of Reaching Out’s Big Lottery Funded target outcomes.

We asked participants at all three of our focus groups about their life skills, and about their ability to make positive, informed choices. In Todmorden and Brighouse, Rastrick and Elland the feeling was that participants’ ability to make positive, informed choices had improved immensely, depending to an extent how long individual women had been on the programme.

Generally speaking, participants’ improved life skills and ability to make informed decisions expressed itself through personal plans and aspirations. One woman, for example, told us about the work she would like to be doing by the time of her 41st birthday. “I want to be doing some kind of social care,” she said, “helping in a women’s refuge, or something like that.”

Women also talked about the fact that their community within the group reinforced their confidence and optimism, “I’m trying to be positive about it, and the group has helped me to be positive,” one woman said, describing her isolation, “rather than sitting on my own in the dark, my poor kids...I look at other people outside and think, ‘You might not be that scary’. Before I came here, everybody was scary.”

Amongst the women we spoke to, making informed and positive choices was linked directly to confidence. “You need that confidence building first, then you feel like, ‘Yes, I can do this, I can make this choice,’” one woman told us.

The exception to this was Park Ward, where women's life skills and decision making capabilities were restricted by language and cultural barriers. Basic life skills, like making appointments or reading leaflets and other sources of guidance, were often reliant on understanding English. "Speaking and listening English," one woman explained to us, "reading and writing English, for example, how to go to a GP and book an appointment."

Community within Reaching Out

The clearest sense of community within Reaching Out emerged, perhaps predictably, in Todmorden where there is a well-established regular group meeting on Thursday mornings, and a second, more recent group that now meets on Tuesdays. The impact of the group was powerful for many of its members, who likened their sister members as family. For some, the sense of support and sharing that comes with membership of the group is profound. "I've met some good, supportive people and I'm part of the group," one woman in Todmorden told us, "We are supporting each other, it's really difficult to meet people in a situation where you're isolated, where you're a parent and you don't get out and about."

Case study Susan, Reaching Out participant

Susan moved from Lancashire to Todmorden with her children. Although she escaped from domestic abuse and from an area beset with social issues, including gangs of youths who focused on her because they knew she was alone, wrecking her car and causing other damage, she soon found herself isolated in Calderdale.

"When I came to Todmorden I was even more on my own," she said, "because I didn't know anybody."

Susan was referred to Reaching Out by a social worker. "My son has autism spectrum disorder and I have no family support," she explained, "so Reaching Out has provided me with some stability, really, and I know there's one day each week where I can come and there's 'me' time, for me and about me. Without Reaching Out I would be totally isolated."

The prospect of Reaching Out finishing is one that worries Susan. "I'm making progress, and it's only with the help of the women I meet through Reaching Out," she said, "I have got a lot of problems, I'm still dealing with a lot of problems, but I know I've got a support system there that wouldn't be there otherwise."

In the longer term Susan wants to find employment. "I'm doing voluntary work at the moment. I've been told that it's below my capabilities, that I should be doing something more, but I felt I needed breathing space, after everything that I've been through."

"Hopefully I'll move forward and do something more substantial later on that will be paid work."

Another participant in Todmorden felt the same. Describing a particularly important friendship she had made through the group, she said “she understands where I’m coming from, because we share quite a few problems.”

“I would never have met anybody like that, because I was locking myself away, going ‘I’m the only one who is going through this.’ I felt like I was going mad.”

Other participants described how the group brought some order to their lives. “It is part of the structure of my week now,” one woman told us, “If I know that one day a week and one day a month we can manage it, and I know I can come and there will be two hours where we sit, just women and just in general, to talk about our experiences of life and how we’re going on, and just helping and laughing.”

Participants also talked about regaining trust through membership of the group, something that some of the women we spoke with found problematic at first. “You learn to trust people here again as well when you’re feeling that you don’t trust anybody,” one woman said, “I didn’t trust anybody.”

“I thought it would be like Alcoholics Anonymous, where you sit in a group and stand up...and lay yourself on the line,” another woman told us, “I struggle with trusting people.”

Participant employability

The number of participants taking up training and volunteering opportunities both form quantitative output targets for Reaching Out, and we explored both these aspects of employability in all three of our focus groups.

All the participants we spoke with in Brighouse and Todmorden were aware of the volunteering opportunities available through Reaching Out, although the picture was less clear in Park Ward.

A fair number of the women we spoke to in Todmorden and Brighouse identified volunteering both as a personal goal or target, and in the longer term as a possible route into paid employment.

For the vast majority of women we interviewed a lack of confidence, often coupled with poor mental health, made a quick transition to paid employment impossible. “I’ve been wanting to get back to work, but I know I can’t because I’m still too ill,” one participant confided, “so I thought my best route would be to go through volunteering.”

Another woman described how her own personal traumatic experiences had drained her of the confidence to work. “I used to work for an insurance company, I’ve been an assistant manager at a beauty product shop,” she said, “so it isn’t that I can’t work.

“I know I’m not as confident as I was, but since what’s happened to me I’ve just totally lost it.” The same woman, however, described a positive experience volunteering at her children’s school for a couple of years. “I loved it,” she said.

One of the advantages of volunteering identified by participants was the way it would get people back into a routine, and through that prepare them for employment. “You’ve got a schedule, where you have to be there at a certain time,” one woman in Brighouse said, “getting you back into the swing of getting up, getting out and getting there.”

In Park Ward we encountered different responses, with less interest in volunteering and a clearer aspiration to find paid work. “We are trying to secure employment, we are constantly trying,” one woman told us. Half of the women we talked to there hoped to find paid employment at the end of Reaching Out, a higher percentage than in either Todmorden or Brighouse, where people aiming to find employment in the near future were in a minority. The general feeling in Park Ward was that if a woman was well enough to work, she would look for work. “Those that don’t want jobs, it’s because they can’t do a job,” one woman there told us, “that’s why they’re not looking for a job.”

Case study Kathleen, Reaching Out participant

Kathleen was devastated when her husband of 23 years left her with three grown up children in 2009. Unable to cope, Kathleen spoke to her GP, who put her in touch with the Reaching Out team.

“Without them I honestly don’t think I’d be here now,” she said, “because they actually put me on the road to doing things, sorting stuff out, helping me, talking to me, they were a lifeline.”

Kathleen’s journey has been a positive one, and she has gained confidence though the programme, something she expects to carry with her in the future.

“I see myself as a confident person, being able to go out and meet the world” she said, “I’ve learned through this journey so far that I am going to be strong, and I am special, and that I will be able to do anything one day.”

Interestingly, when we discussed both paid and unpaid vocational choices with women in Todmorden and Brighouse, without exception participants described caring roles, where they could ‘give something back. Working with women who had experienced similar difficulties in life emerged as a particularly clear theme. “I’d like to help somebody who’s been in the same situation as me,” one woman said, “you do tend to think that you’re on your own, there’s nobody else in your situation.”

Park Ward was again a rather different experience. The women we worked with there did not see caring roles as a particular aspiration, instead discussing jobs such as typing or packing in factories. Although there could be cultural reasons for this difference in aims and aspirations, it seems as likely on balance that for these women, the language barriers they needed to overcome before they could hope to find paid work were so formidable, particularly given their histories of isolation and other problems, that the precise fields of employment they might look for were of secondary importance.

Training through Reaching Out

Training emerged from our evaluation as an activity that participants aspired to more clearly than either paid or voluntary work. Perhaps reflecting this to an extent, it also emerged as the only area of Reaching Out where people would like to see the offering broadened.

The programme’s Confidence and Self-esteem courses were those that women discussed the most in Todmorden and Brighouse. One of the key messages that came from this was that, for many women, attending a confidence building course could be a considerable aspiration in itself, and the project’s decision to integrate the tutor’s role with the outreach team was an important one. “I’ve done confidence courses, which I’m still doing,” one woman told us, “but the help and support... if you’d have seen me eighteen months ago, I wasn’t the same person, because every time something’s come up and everything’s gone down, who’s come along and stood me back up again?”

Case study Julie, Reaching Out participant

Julie lived in Todmorden until her husband fell ill with terminal cancer. “I was trying to make myself brave, coping myself,” she remembered, “I thought I was coping okay but I can’t have been.”

Due to a very complicated family situation, Julie and her husband also became homeless at this crucial time. After a brief period living with her son, Julie and her husband moved into a flat in a rehabilitation centre in a nearby town.

After her husband’s death, Julie’s troubles really began. “He wasn’t insured, and I had to pay for a funeral with a loan from the bank,” she said, “and because I’d finished work to look after him I couldn’t get any allowances because I was sixty, no caring allowance or anything like that, so I just went to pieces.”

After having been accused of fraud, Julie turned to Reaching Out at the suggestion of a friend. The Todmorden outreach worker Gail helped Julie and introduced her to the regular group meetings. “She’s helped me with my finances, she’s taught me to put different things in files, organise my life,” she said, “my house was a tip because my life was in a tip. So things are getting back together again, but if they stopped [Reaching Out] I don’t know what I’ll do, because I’m going from strength to strength.”

Gail, through the wider WomenCentre, was also able to help get the court case against Julie overturned.

The Reaching Out women’s group meetings are critical for Julie. “This is our family, we can tell each other how we feel,” she said.

The feedback on the courses themselves was wholly positive. “It’s also the confidence and self-esteem courses that they run as well,” one woman told us, “I’ve done them and they’re really helpful.”

Computing and IT courses were also discussed by some participants. “I didn’t even know how to turn a computer on, never mind work one,” one woman confessed, “I’ve been doing a course now for two months, and I can send e-mails, I’ve set up my own internet banking, I can shop on-line...I would never have done that if [this course] hadn’t been here.”

Participants did raise a number of training needs with us, particularly around better crèche facilities in Brighouse, and a shortage of interpreters in Park Ward.

In Brighouse, participants felt that keep fit courses might also help the gain confidence, provided they had both a crèche and a female instructor. One woman recalled a keep fit class she used to attend at the Isis Centre in Bradford. “It was with a woman,” she said, “when the next year came they didn’t do a woman, they did a bloke, and I dropped out.”

GCSEs in English and Maths were discussed as additional educational provision that participants would like to see offered through the WomenCentre, and which might open doors to further and higher education.

Some participants felt that courses could be offered in subjects that were more directly useful to women who had left violent or abusive partners, and were trying to start a new life. Do It Yourself courses were identified as a need that could both help women build confidence, and might be of practical value. “If you’ve been isolated, you don’t know anyone to ask for help, if you’re on benefits you can’t afford to get someone in,” one woman pointed out.

In Park Ward women seemed less aware that training was available, something explained in part by the shortage in interpreters, effectively removing their access to them. Health and Safety was mentioned as a training need, and the women we spoke to also liked the idea of confidence building courses.

Functional English, however, that would enable women to read and converse in English, and carry out routine tasks such as booking medical appointments or visiting statutory agencies, were the most wanted courses amongst the participants we talked to.

Participant satisfaction with Reaching Out

High levels of satisfaction with Reaching Out emerged from all our focus group and one-to-one discussions with the women who use its services, with no criticisms bar a smattering of suggestions for additional training provision.

Across all three project areas, people discussed the fact that just knowing Reaching Out was there as a considerable asset in itself. “It’s somebody that you can contact, just lifeline,” one woman told us. Others agreed. “It’s a lifeline for us,” one said.

Case study Mrs H, Reaching Out participant

The widow of an Indian professional living in a predominantly white area, Mrs H has been supported by the BME Reaching Out outreach worker Julie, for three or four months to counter the isolation she feels. “I am alone, no relatives, no community here” she told us, “my area is an English area. I am good at reading English but I speak in Hindi.”

Herself a languages graduate in Urdu and Hindi, Mrs H wants to improve her English, not for vocational reasons (she is retired) but so she can communicate better, and through this socialise more. “I want only for confidence in English speaking,” she said, “speaking and listening.”

Although she finds the support she receives from Reaching Out invaluable, Mrs H would like to see more Indian Hindus recruited to the programme. “I want a good friend, I have no good friends,” she complained, “I want somebody Indian, a good lady friend.”

In Park Ward, people were particularly reliant on Julie, their outreach worker, and possibly tended to associate her rather more with WomenCentre than with Reaching Out, but the levels of satisfaction were high nonetheless. “She’s a very good worker,” one woman said, “we don’t want her to go.”

“In WomenCentre all the people, including the non-Asian workers, are good,” another woman said.

All areas of Reaching Out’s provision received praise, but people were particularly complimentary about its holistic approach, that they received ‘whole life’ support from their outreach workers, to whom they felt they could turn with any need. “They’ve sorted out my benefits, they’ve sorted out for paying my bills,” one woman in Brighouse told us, “if I had to write everything down that they’ve done for me, it’s not just Steeve [her outreach worker] it’s all of them.”

In many cases this whole life support both helped women out of crisis, and helped them to stay out of crisis afterwards. “If it hadn’t have been for the help and support that these ladies have given me, I don’t think I’d even be here,” one woman told us.

Participants in Park Ward were if anything even more reliant on the whole life support of their outreach worker. “Julie helps me a lot, she helped me to secure a house,” one woman there said, “I was four months pregnant when I got kicked out, I had two children with me, Julie helped me to get a house.”

The future without Reaching Out

For the women we talked to, the future without Reaching Out was a bleak prospect. Participants highlighted in particular the loss of social networks and the risk of a slide back into isolation as their biggest fears. “I certainly wouldn’t have anyone to talk to,” one woman said, whilst another spoke of her fears that she personally would “go back down.”

“I don’t want to think about it,” a woman in Park Ward told us, “every time I think about it and Julie says she might finish in October, I just get depressed.”

This sense of dismay apart, there were also signs that some of the women were already resigned to life without Reaching Out. We felt that the women in Todmorden were probably the best placed to sustain their network after the project ends, primarily because of their existing groups. After our evaluation had finished we heard that the outreach worker in Brighouse, Rastrick and Elland had ‘fast tracked’ the establishment of a regular group meeting there. By the time this report was finished the Brighouse women’s group was well established and demonstrating self-sustainability, a clear indication of the success of the project.

There was a strong feeling amongst all the women we spoke to that, should they themselves not be able to sustain their own self-support networks, there were not really any other similar resources available through other agencies as an alternative, a view affirmed by the project’s partners when we spoke with them. “If you go to the doctors they put pills down your throat,” one woman complained, “or they might offer you counselling, but by the time you wait for your counselling to come through you’ve more or less sorted it out.”

One woman described how she would struggle to cope with travelling to Halifax to WomenCentre, but identified it as her challenge to build up her confidence to the point where she could make the journey once her support is no longer available locally. “So the way I’d look at it from now,” she said, “is, well, that’s it then.”

Staff, volunteers and partners

The pivotal importance of the Reaching Out project's staff runs through all our discussions with the women who use the service in all of the three project areas. The team's three part-time outreach workers, Gail, Steeve and Julie, together with the project tutor Sarah, clearly provided a lifeline for the women they worked with.

Supporting this team, which might be described as the operational face of Reaching Out, there is a team leader, a volunteer co-ordinator, an administrative worker and a team of between six and eight trained volunteers.

We concluded our evaluation by running separate focus groups with the project's staff and volunteers. We also ran two groups specifically for partners, one in Brighouse and one in Todmorden. We finish by reporting their insight into why the project has been a success, how similar initiatives might learn from Reaching Out's experience, and what the future is likely to hold for the women who use Reaching Out when the project draws to a close.

Reaching Out staff

We talked to the whole Reaching Out team about the Big Lottery Funded target outcomes and specifically about participant employability; the professional challenges of making such a big and complex project work; project management, and about their relationships with participants, partners and volunteers. We also talked about how the project might be improved, and the learning that's come from the three years of Reaching Out.

Case study Lucy, Reaching Out participant

Lucy moved from another West Yorkshire town to Brighouse, a survivor of domestic violence. She chose Brighouse because that's where her brother lives, and after moving there with her two-year old, in desperation contacted WomenCentre for support.

"I told them my situation, that I was too scared to leave the house and stuff like that," she told us, "and they said there was a centre on the other side of Brighouse but it didn't have crèche facilities...they said 'Hang on a minute, there's something else coming up,' and then they told me about this one at Waring Green, with crèche."

Although Lucy has not yet started one-to-one sessions with her outreach worker, the programme has already had a clear impact. "It's got me out of the house," she said, "I was on a waiting list, I had to wait a few months, but knowing there was something in the pipeline, that was a big help in itself. Then when I actually started coming to the sessions, fabulous."

The Reaching Out meetings are one of the few social activities Lucy is able to face. "Put it this way," she said, "I moved to Brighouse in April, and one of the things I had to give up was church. Since I've been here there's a church literally over the road from where I live, and I'm too scared to go. I've only been once."

"I've been to all the sessions here, I'm still too scared to go to church, but I've been able to come here."

In terms of the project's output targets, it soon became clear that the low pressure approach that participants found so reassuring was a conscious strategy on the part of the Reaching Out team. Although outreach staff were fully aware of the output targets and their importance, there was a determination that their activities would be needs rather than output led. The success of this approach from the perspective of the project's participants emerged as a clear theme during this evaluation.

The fact that the project's training provision would generally run never mind how few people attended was cited as one example of this. Knowing that the course will be running whatever provides constancy for the women who take part in Reaching Out, staff felt.

There was some discussion about the role of employability in the project's targets, with one member of staff pointing out that returning people to work was not part of their remit. Staff in general agreed that one of the reasons women were keen to engage with Reaching Out was precisely because there is not pressure from the project to get people into jobs. Improving women's employability certainly forms one of the project's aims, but for many women, improving employability might mean going on a confidence building course.

The project team did feel that employment as a long term objective was important to most of the women who went through the project, but probably through volunteering first. Their perception was that the programme was also about trust and empowerment, and that for some women this was as important as employability.

Case study Jackie, Reaching Out Volunteer Co-ordinator

As volunteer co-ordinator Jackie both recruits and trains volunteers to work with the women on Reaching Out but also identifies volunteering opportunities for the women themselves. "It's a two way thing," she told us, "the volunteers on the team are gaining experience, because some are looking to go into employment, and the women that we're working with have the benefit of being supported in whatever doing."

"It might be that a volunteer supports a woman going on a course, or something like that, they sit alongside."

Jackie began at WomenCentre as a volunteer worker herself ten years ago, and is acutely aware of the importance of professional development. "I want it to be a positive experience for them," she said, "I want them to be able to self develop, so I'm always looking at their training needs and trying to give them a variety of volunteering."

Volunteers are trained from the moment they join Reaching Out. "Historically, what will happen is the volunteer will come to the Centre and do our core training," Jackie said, "and then we will recruit them on to the Reaching Out team. They'll have induction training on our team. In terms of the clients I think quite often when we start to engage with them they're not anywhere near the point of being able to volunteer, so usually they go along to the confidence building courses."



There was considerable discussion about professionalism and professional development, with a strong feeling that Reaching Out's outreach workers have experienced an element of deprofessionalisation, and they had become 'jacks of all trades and masters of none.' Reaching Out was seen by staff as the only project within WomenCentre that did not include a clear specialism, and workers wondered whether more might be done to recognise outreach itself as a specialism, perhaps through a professional qualification or some other form of continuing professional development.

Staff felt that the lack of specialism was partly the result of the fact they and the volunteer workers were so busy that they did not get the opportunity to develop or utilise their existing skills.

The Tutor had many opportunities for professional development, as a result of being part of the wider Centre, and was able to keep her teaching CPD (continuing professional development) up to date. The Tutor worked alongside a co-Tutor from Calderdale's Inclusion Support Service and experienced a high degree of peer review over the course of the first year. However, being the only tutor within the Reaching Out Team did not always provide the opportunity to have lesson observations with peers. In the future it is worth considering formalising the link between an individual tutor based in another team and peer tutors from within WomenCentre's Learning and Skills team.

Project management received some criticism from the staff we talked with, particularly in relation to the project's start up phase. Staff suggested that a 'setting up' period should be designed into future initiatives like this, so partnerships and administration would be in place by the time operational staff joined the project.

The team leader was new to outreach work, staff felt, and was not in post when the project began. One outcome from this was that the outreach workers themselves had not really been clear about their roles when they started. "It was quite difficult to get a consistent message across," one outreach worker remembered.

People agreed, however, that one strength that came from this was that the full team was involved in developing the detail of the project in its early phases, and that through this they had developed a sense of 'ownership,' which had been beneficial.

The Reaching Out project posed some new and complex challenges for staff at WomenCentre as this level of outreach was new to them. One example of this is that the project has highlighted the need for a team manager to work at least as many hours a week as the outreach workers. The team manager was appointed to work 21 hours a week, whereas the outreach staff worked for 27 hours per week. Staff felt this had both impeded their communication with their manager, and had restricted their manager's freedom to get out to the venues and see first hand what was going on.

A further challenge that WomenCentre has worked to overcome throughout the project was the need to develop more robust policies around lone working and an effective duty manager system.

Strengths of Reaching Out

Despite this criticism of their project management structures and the early phases of the project, staff were proud of the impact of their work and of the strengths of Reaching Out overall.

Ironically, one of the great strengths staff identified came from the fact that women could spend as long passing through Reaching Out as they needed, even though this had been underestimated in the original bid. Both the Big Lottery Fund and WomenCentre had expected women to pass from one stage of the programme to the next more rapidly than they had in practice, and did not expect the project team to be working with some women for 18 months or longer. Although this has caused difficulties with some of the target outputs, staff felt the long term approach that Reaching Out takes has been one of its great attractions for the women who use it, a view reinforced by the findings of our evaluation.

Another strength, project staff felt, was that the outreach workers had more time to work with individual women than, for instance, midwives or health visitors had. The project's ethos of 'never giving up' was talked about, particularly in relation to hard to reach women, some of whom did not even have phones.

Often Reaching Out workers act as the lead professional with women, and through this they have co-ordinated the work of other agencies. Staff gave the example of working proactively with a community psychiatric nurse to illustrate this. Project team members also felt that Reaching Out sometimes has an important role in 'team around the child (TAC)' meetings, where a lead professional will draw up a common assessment framework, but Reaching Out will often have to ensure that everybody does what they are supposed to.

Working with other agencies

Outreach workers reported generally very good working relations with other agencies, with a feeling perhaps that some had been a little defensive at first, but that this had improved quickly. There were occasions when Reaching Out had to be firm on behalf of its clients, which could cause some friction with other agencies. Staff members were particularly critical of Children's Social Services in Calderdale, and gave the example of one client who had problems with her daughter, who was 16 years old and had learning difficulties. Children's Social Services said she was too old for them to support, and Adult Social Services said they could not pick her up until she was 18.

Job Centre Plus and Todmorden's Children's Centre have been particularly good partners, and both referred women to Reaching Out for confidence building courses and other similar forms of support.

Staff discussed the fact that working with other agencies can bring added value, such as access to free venues and training rooms. The Children's Centre in Todmorden, for instance, provides a crèche room free of charge and Calderdale's Inclusion Support Service provided a free training room in Todmorden College for confidence building courses. However, everyone agreed that these partnerships take a long time to develop.

Staff relationship with participants

The relationship between outreach workers and their clients, supported by the tutor and volunteer workers, can be an intense one. The difference that their work makes to their clients' lives is one of the major rewards for the project team, and patience and perseverance emerged as strengths of both individual workers and the Reaching Out team overall.

Staff felt they tried to take women's journeys out of isolation with them, visiting them in their homes at times, and building on positives always. Listening properly was an important part of developing client relations, which can bring a non-antagonistic relationship of the sort that other agencies might find difficult to achieve.

Outreach workers also discussed signposting people to sources of advice, and that some guidance is available from within WomenCentre, such as advice on benefits. In general, however, they try to avoid adopting an advocacy role, as they are working towards their clients being able to speak for themselves.

The role of the BME outreach worker has included advocacy, but this is largely the product of the cost of interpretation, which means when women go for appointments at agencies such as Job Centre Plus, Julie often goes with them.

Staff relationship with volunteers

Beyond counselling, the only area of Reaching Out that has not worked as well as intended seemed to us to be volunteering.

The volunteer co-ordinator felt that it would have been an advantage if a volunteer team had been recruited earlier in the project's life, even if that meant training volunteers before any clients had been recruited. Instead of recruiting all the volunteers at once, however, they have joined the team at different times, which caused some unnecessary management challenges.

An additional operational complexity came from the fact that the outreach workers supervise volunteers in the community, whereas the volunteer team overall is co-ordinated from the centre.

Learning From Staff Feedback

The complex and new nature of the work and the different roles within the team caused some initial challenges to team working. Although some team building sessions were included in the first year of the project, staff felt that more time should be devoted to this in any future projects of this type.

Staff discussed other improvements or changes that should be incorporated into similar initiatives in the future.

Outreach workers in particular felt that dedicated space in their target localities from the outset would make engagement with isolated women there easier.

There were mixed views about the wisdom of targeting specific areas rather than taking more of a 'broad brush' approach. Focusing on three areas had left many women in areas like Hebden Bridge, Mytholmroyd, Greetland and Sowerby Bridge effectively excluded from the programme. On the other hand, working within specific communities brought access to resources such as community-based venues, in which local women tended to feel more comfortable.

The fact it proved impossible to establish an outreach counselling service was seen as evidence that, just because something works well in WomenCentre it does not necessarily mean it will work well out in the community.

There was a feeling that more work could have been done before the project started around partnerships.

Finally, staff felt that budget limitations had restricted the activities they could develop, and more fun ways of engaging women might have been possible with greater resources. The confidence courses were cited as one example of this. Although they themselves were fantastic, staff felt, it might have been possible to find additional, more innovative ways for women to gain confidence.

Volunteers

Although the women volunteering to work on Reaching Out had been represented on the staff focus group, we felt it was reasonable for them to want an opportunity to discuss their experiences in more detail, and with this in mind we ran a small focus group specifically for the volunteers and volunteer co-ordinator Jackie. Four members of the volunteer team attended this meeting.

To an extent, we wanted to use this session as an opportunity to explore some of the issues that had been raised during the staff focus group, so we began by asking people how clear they felt their roles on the project were.

The volunteers repeated the point made in the staff focus group that it would have been better if the volunteers had been recruited as a single team and trained earlier in the project. This did not happen, they believed, because the outreach workers did not know what the volunteers' roles would be.

The original bid document did specify a role description for the volunteers, they said, but they felt that in practice they were hardly doing any of the things specified in this, and that the opportunities were not there for them.

There was some feeling that when outreach workers put an action plan together, they should agree with their line manager where a volunteer could provide support. This would see the volunteers being engaged at a much earlier stage.

As a result of some issues beyond WomenCentre's control, such as the slow return of CRB Disclosures, some volunteers were unable to see women on their own as quickly as they would have liked, and partly as a result of this felt under-utilised in their role.

Case study Cheryl, Reaching Out volunteer

Cheryl had been working as a volunteer in WomenCentre when she heard about the Reaching Out project, which she soon joined, again, as a volunteer worker.

At the time that she joined the project, she only had a vulnerable adults Criminal Records Bureau check, which limited the outreach work she could support. Her first task on the project was organising evaluations in Brighthouse. “What I do is I go over it (the evaluation questionnaire) on the ‘phone with them,” she said, “You don’t know what’s going to be happening when you ‘phone them up, so there is also an aspect of doing counselling while you’re there.”

“I had one lady, it was on my very first evaluation ‘phone call, and she was actually a witness to a crime, a guy had broken his parole and he’d gone on to their estate, and she was in a terrible state, she threatened to kill herself, she was absolutely terrified, so it was a case of quick thinking, get her to call 999, and inform a liaison officer what was going on.”

Cheryl has now got her children and vulnerable adults CRB, so is expecting to go out into the community more. “The uniqueness is that we take the service out to the women,” she said, “and it’s not just one thing the outreach workers deal with, they can provide signposting for lots of different things.”

Cheryl hopes to find employment in the same general area that Reaching Out operates in. “I’m going for jobs in this field, volunteer co-ordinating,” she said, “what I’m finding at the moment is that people are saying I’m too good to be a trainee, but I’ve not got enough experience, so I’m kind of in the middle, but it’s given me the confidence to go for these kinds of jobs.”

Cheryl is studying for her NVQ level 2 in Health and Social Care through WomenCentre and after this wants to complete level 3. “You never know, I might even go to university and do a degree,” she said, “the more strings I have to my bow the more likely I am to get a career in this field.”



We asked volunteers what had motivated them to join WomenCentre, and from there to volunteer with Reaching Out.

One of the volunteers we spoke to was a former service user herself, and although she saw volunteering as part of her pathway to paid employment in the same field, her prime motivation was to be able to give something back, and to help women going through similar experiences to those she herself had experienced in the past.

Another volunteer had also had traumatic experiences in her life, and had started volunteering when a friend had used WomenCentre. “I did my counselling [course] at college, got lots of other skills,” she said, “it was like a light bulb coming on, I thought ‘I want to volunteer at the women’s centre.’”

Training

The three volunteers we spoke with were enthusiastic about the training they had been given through Reaching Out, which included a six-week induction course. “Fantastic training,” one told us, “learning about WomenCentre, different aspects of listening skills, one-to-one, confidentiality.”

The training also covered domestic violence, mental health, health and safety and dealing with crisis situations.

Relationship with project staff

Some tension between the paid staff and the volunteer team had emerged at the staff focus group, and the volunteers we spoke with reiterated the feeling that they were highly skilled, but were not being utilised either early or fully enough. There was also a suggestion that occasionally the volunteers felt the outreach staff were a little defensive, or “quite precious about their role and the work they are doing with women,” as one person put it.

The volunteers felt this reluctance to use their services fully led to unnecessarily hectic workloads for the outreach staff themselves.

Relationship with clients

We asked volunteers about their work supporting clients, and what their relationship with the clients was like.

Some volunteer activities were office based, such as dealing with women over the phone or organising meetings. One volunteer described carrying out telephone based evaluations of Reaching Out activities.

Once they had their Children and Vulnerable Adults CRB clearance, the volunteers could offer support directly to the clients, under the supervision of the outreach workers. Volunteers gave examples where they had provided one-to-one support to clients.

Where the opportunities exist, volunteers can develop strong relationships with the clients, and there was certainly some belief in the group that the clients sometimes open up more with the volunteers than they do with their outreach workers.

Changes to Reaching Out

We asked volunteers about changes they would like to see to Reaching Out. Their responses were more concerned with making the volunteering parts of the existing model work better than any particular change to Reaching Out’s offering.

Getting people together as a team was also problematic, because they were spread across three sites. However, the major complaint was that the volunteers had not been recruited together or early enough in the life of the project. There was also a feeling that volunteer involvement in cases should get a clearer steer from management, and that without this suitable opportunities would not materialise at the rate they should.

When we asked volunteers about the future, it was clear that from many points of view the end of the project was going to have less impact on them than on any of the other three groups we had talked with. The participants were going to lose their support; partners were going to lose a resource they could offer; and the project staff were going to lose their jobs.

The volunteers we spoke with, however, were simply going to transfer their volunteering across to one of the other teams working out of WomenCentre, so we asked them instead how they thought the project ending would impact on the women they worked with.

“It’s heart breaking,” one of them told us, “and it doesn’t just break my heart, it upsets the women.”

“It’s the trust as well, it takes so long to build the trust up, and then when you’ve built that trust, you’ve built that relationship and you start to see something shift a little, and then to have to take it away from them.”

Volunteers did discuss helping the groups try to achieve self-sustainability, but felt they might find this difficult without things like childcare and a professional worker. They were trying to signpost women to alternative resources, but as the partners we spoke with affirmed, in the project’s target areas there wasn’t really anything available.

Partners

We held two focus group sessions with Reaching Out's partners. These were attended collectively by almost 20 people representing voluntary and statutory agencies as diverse as Calderdale MBC, West Yorkshire Police, Calderdale Carers Project, Todmorden High School, NHS Mental Health Services, the Acorn Centre, the Oakdale Psychological Service, Children and Family Services, and Customer First. All had operational experience of working with Reaching Out and its outreach team.

All the partners we spoke with were clear – Reaching Out provided a vital service for isolated women, often working collaboratively with other agencies to provide integrated support for clients, particularly those with families.

Some partners discussed joint working with Reaching Out, citing one case where they had concentrated on the needs of the children involved, whilst Reaching Out had worked with the mother. Children and Family Services often focus on the child, but “mum may have many issues,” they said.

The overall impression of the advantages of working together emerged from both focus groups, with many positive outcomes being identified through partners' experience of working with Reaching Out around families in need.

One partner felt that the outreach team had taught other agencies much relevant information about relevant legislation and other important knowledge around isolated women. “It's been a learning curve,” she said. Others agreed.

Case study Ruth, Reaching Out partner

Ruth has been working on secondment to Family Services in the Upper Calder Valley for about 18 months, and discovered Reaching Out through sharing premises with them at Todmorden College. “I am located in the same building that they are running the confidence courses in,” she said.

Although she works with Reaching Out in a variety of ways, Ruth feels the courses the programme offer are particularly useful. “Just having the opportunity to come to these courses is beneficial for the women, because it gives them a structure for their week,” she believes, “some of them won't go out anywhere in the week, apart from maybe dropping children off at school, and I think it gives them an opportunity to come out of the home and mix with other women who've had similar problems.”

Ruth finds sharing information with Reaching Out is important. “I've had connections with Gail, who is also supporting one of the parents I'm supporting, and we've been able to chat and compare our knowledge, and see if we can support the parent a bit better.”

Reaching Out drawing to a close will limit the resources Ruth can access in her work. “For me personally, in the role I'm doing,” she said, “it's going to leave a big gap, because I won't have as much to offer parents in things to do and places to go.”



Case study Denise, Reaching Out partner

Denise is the inclusion manager at a local high school, and first began to work with the Reaching Out team after the Todmorden outreach worker contacted her to discuss one of her pupil's families.

Denise was already working with the pupil, but was not aware of the complex background issues in the family. "Gail and myself met, talked over these issues, and from this we organised a common assessment framework document, which went into great detail. We worked in an integrated way," she remembers, "and invited lots of agencies."

The pupil had been through a harrowing time, witnessing extensive domestic violence which affected development. The result of the multiagency meetings were better services for the pupil, better home-school relations and increased confidence in the parent.

Denise is concerned by the prospect of the programme coming to an end. "We'll struggle," she said, "if it stops I hope it starts up again, like a phoenix rising from the ashes, in another shape or form, because I would certainly be lost without it. I need that resource."



Although most of the discussions we had focused on the role that Reaching Out can play supporting the mother as part of a broader, team-based family provision, some partners in the social care sector were keen to emphasise that their referrals to Reaching Out were not confined to parents. They might as easily be older women with all sorts of issues, they said.

The West Yorkshire Police representatives from Halifax Police Station described how they could use Reaching Out's successful community engagement in Park Ward as a vehicle to get their own messages across to minority communities. They told us how their involvement in one Reaching Out event led to a young woman joining the Special Constabulary.

Although there were one or two examples of strategic partnerships where the instruction to work with Reaching Out had come from the top down, the vast majority of partnerships had evolved through operational collaboration on the ground.

Partners felt that Reaching Out's presence in the communities they were serving was critical, and that many of the women they worked with would not travel to Halifax once the project finished, a theme that emerged clearly from our discussions with the participants.

When we asked which provision they found most useful, most partners replied that all of it was important. "The knowledge that it's there," one partner said, "it's needs led, families all have different needs, so the whole range of provision is important."

Partners described receiving positive feedback from their referrals to Reaching Out, and one partner in Todmorden described how she could see the improvement herself in the women who had joined the programme.

Case study Kay, Reaching Out partner

Kay is based in the Family Support team for the Upper Calder Valley, and works closely with Reaching Out around some of her clients. “It’s invaluable,” she said, “we work as a team, we can share the family between us, I can focus around children’s issues whereas the Reaching Out team will focus on mum’s individual needs.”

Kay is not aware of any alternative to Reaching Out for the families she works with. “We’d have to go the central WomenCentre in Halifax, and that would be much harder for families to access. It wouldn’t be realistic to expect them to travel the distance, she said.

Although not able to single any of Reaching Out’s resources for particular praise, saying that she needed them all, Kay did feel that a lot of her families went to the self-confidence and self esteem courses. “It’s like a stepping stone,” she said, “I might work with them for up to twelve months individually, they might go to a group for confidence, with support that might prepare them to come to a parenting course, and then move on towards college, and into work.”

The closure of Reaching Out will impact on the families Kay works with. “We are preventing crisis,” she said, “and once those families have a service removed, the crisis is more likely to increase.”



Another partner pointed out that some of the women her organisation referred to Reaching Out then progressed into paid work, evidence it would seem, of the project’s contribution to its participants’ employability. She referred in particular to one woman who had been very depressed before she joined Reaching Out, but was now working as a teaching assistant, and more generally to others who had progressed to college.

After this comment, there was some discussion around the need for partners to share evidence more, which everyone present was willing to consider.

The close working relationships that partners enjoyed with the outreach workers ensured there was no duplication of effort, they said. Partners were keen to point out that their relationship with Reaching Out was a reciprocal one, in that just as they referred women to the project, so Reaching Out at times referred women to their services. One woman, from Children’s Services, stressed how important it was to take services out to communities, especially in the rural areas around Todmorden. They had even commissioned a play bus, she said, because this was what people in these communities wanted, services that come out to them.

Partners in Todmorden described also the value of the College as a venue in countering stigmatisation. Their clients would say, ‘We’re off to the College,’ further reinforcing the message we picked up from the participants themselves.

Partners also highlighted Reaching Out's important contribution through working with women with poor mental health. One partner discussed how many of the women she worked with would not engage with Mental Health Services, but would engage with the Reaching Out's outreach workers in her own home. From this start, building the confidence to join the group could often mean that the women ultimately did not need Mental Health Services after all.

Another partner, from the Mental Health Services, described how the additional support of Reaching Out complemented their counselling and other psychological therapies.

Improvements to Reaching Out

When we asked partners what improvements they would like to see included in the Reaching Out offering, their reply was 'more of it.' The programme should be extended, not closed down. There were already large areas of the Calder Valley without any available support, and the project should be expanded to cover these. "It's not a case of asking that they do better," one partner said, "It's just putting more of what they do in place."

In the Todmorden focus group there was a strong feeling that outreach provision should be offered to men. Families are not just women and children, they said, and there was a desperate shortage of resources for men with poor mental health or isolation issues to turn to.

The future without Reaching Out

Partners were without exception unhappy that the project was coming to an end, and felt it would leave a gap in their provision.

One woman described how she had tried referring people to other agencies, but always came back to Reaching Out.

"I think a lot of people are going to be devastated, both services and clients," another woman said, "I just think it's invaluable."

The Police felt that the loss of Reaching Out's community engagement would be a blow. "Our fear is that these doors will close," one officer said, "for us the frustration is that we will have to build those links up again."

Partners from the voluntary sector were equally pessimistic. "More workload for other organisations that are struggling as it is," one woman said about the impact of Reaching Out closing, "and it will be that the boundaries will be much clearer about what we don't do."

"As voluntary organisations we're going to have to get much better at saying 'No' to people, which personally I will find difficult, especially when you've been able to support people in the past."

RESEARCH

FINDINGS

1. Project **output data** show that Reaching Out had met or exceeded most of its output targets during Years 1 and 2. Despite the failure to establish a counselling service, targets for the number of women receiving counselling were being met by Year 2, and targets for the number of women receiving one-to-one support were being greatly exceeded to a large extent reducing the need for counselling.
2. Data on **referrals** from the end of Year 2 show that more women were referred from the Todmorden area (46%) than either Park Ward (23%) or Brighouse, Rastrick and Elland (31%). Women tended to be aged either between 25 and 34 years old (33.75% of those surveyed) or between 35 and 44 (25%). There were few referrals for women aged 55 or older. Women were most likely to refer themselves to Reaching Out (36%), with the most frequent referrals from other agencies coming from children's centres (15%) or health visitors (13%). Only 5% of referrals came from mental health services.
3. **Low self-esteem** or low confidence was the most common underlying reason for referral (53%), followed by the desire to access training or courses (31%), isolation (24%) and mental health and wellbeing issues (25%), with the rider that there will inevitably be an overlap between low self confidence, isolation and mental health/wellbeing, and possibly training as well.
4. **Poor mental health** certainly seemed to be the most common single causal factor of isolation amongst the women we spoke with in Todmorden and Brighouse, Rastrick and Elland, although a previous history of **domestic violence** also figured prominently.
5. Although women in Park Ward had experienced similar issues as those in Todmorden and Brighouse, Rastrick and Elland, the most immediate reasons for their isolation were cultural, particularly an inability to read or understand **functional English**.
6. For many women, turning to Reaching Out had been a **last resort**, a decision driven by despair, with participants talking of having been 'rock bottom.'
7. Isolation often articulated itself as **fear**, sometimes, when caused by previous domestic violence, fear of men specifically, but in other cases fear of society more generally. In a small number of cases, fear and desperation had even precipitated suicidal thoughts, although we did not investigate the extent to which these had manifested themselves.
8. Some women suffering from **poor mental health** spoke of Reaching Out as more helpful to them therapeutically than state mental health services, and as their first choice for support as old crises resurfaced or new ones developed.
9. This **role that Reaching Out plays** is recognised by mental health service teams, who sometimes refer their clients to Reaching Out for support, or who use Reaching Out to provide added value to the therapeutic services they are offering.
10. **Travel** emerged as a deterrent preventing women in Todmorden and Brighouse, Rastrick and Elland from using WomenCentre in Halifax, and it is not likely that many women will make that journey once the project finishes, a view shared by Reaching Out's partners. Taking the resource out to the community appears to be necessary if people are going to use it, something also identified by Children and Family Services.
11. Conversely, **travel** did not emerge as a particular issue in Park Ward, where the barriers discussed were almost wholly concerned with language or culture.
12. **Childcare** emerged as a barrier across all three of the project's localities, but perhaps more strongly in Brighouse, Rastrick and Elland and Park Ward than in Todmorden, where it has been easier to provide crèche facilities.
13. We found that **women heard about Reaching Out** from a wide range of sources, including partner referral, housing associations, doctors, midwives, psychological and psychiatric services, churches and directly, through events like the Reaching Out launch events.

14. Typically, the women we spoke with had been part of Reaching Out for periods of between six months and one year, but many had been with the project for 18 months or longer. This was far longer than WomenCentre had expected when it applied for Big Lottery Fund support, and **women's needs for longer term interventions** is a considerable example of the learning that has come from Reaching Out's operations.

15. In general, women found the **one-to-one support** offered by their outreach workers the most valuable aspect of Reaching Out, and although where counselling had been available women were complimentary about it, most women found that the one-to-one support met many of their counselling needs anyway. From this perspective we felt that the failure of the counselling programme to materialise had not had any significant impact for the women who used Reaching Out.

16. The experience in Todmorden was rather different, in that although the one-to-one support was highly valued, the strongest theme was the sense of **community and friendship** achieved through the group, reflecting the fact that Todmorden was the only one of the three sites to have established a cycle of regular group meetings with crèche support by the time of our evaluation.

17. In Park Ward, the one-to-one support clearly had an **advocacy role** in practice, and the outreach worker provided an informal interpretation service, accompanying women on visits to statutory agencies, and in one case even helping a woman get a house.

18. From both the participants and the outreach team itself, the project's philosophy of not pushing women, of allowing women to follow their own **rate of progression** according to their needs and capabilities, emerged as both a deliberate strategy and one of Reaching Out's greatest success factors.

19. Although progress was not measured against specific targets or plans, women did tend to have **goals**, and there was a relatively widespread understanding that a pathway existed through one-to-one support, confidence and confidence building to further training and voluntary work, and from there into paid employment. For many of the women we spoke with, however, poor mental health and other disabilities made paid employment unlikely in practice, and the strongest aspiration we encountered in Todmorden and Brighouse, Rastrick and Elland was to work towards **volunteering** of some form.

20. **Self-confidence and self-esteem** were the clearest factors in successful progression, and although the programme's self-confidence courses were highly valued both by participants and partner agencies, there was a feeling amongst participating women and the project's staff that more innovative ways of building confidence might be explored. Keep fit with crèche facilities and Do It Yourself courses were both mentioned as possibilities.

21. In Park Ward, **self-confidence and self reliance** were both sought after, but were both clearly linked to language and the barriers that presented.

22. Acquiring greater self-confidence and self worth led naturally to developing more **life skills** and the **ability to make positive, informed choices**, two of the BLF target outcomes. In Park Ward, again, life skills and making positive, informed choices were restricted by participants' additional language barriers.

23. The strongest **sense of community** we encountered was in Todmorden, where regular group meetings were well established. The women we spoke with talked of the impact of community on confidence, trust, sociability and mutual support, and the powerful value of community for these women is another example of the learning that has come from the Reaching Out initiative.

24. Improving **employability** was also a target output of the BLF funding, and one that needed measuring according to the capabilities of the individual woman. In some cases there was a powerful desire to work towards employment, most usually through training and volunteering first. In others, improving employability might be measured through a woman finding the resolve to join a self-confidence class.

25. **Volunteering** was highly rated as a way through which women could both gain self-confidence and esteem, and also get into the rigours of routine and structure, and through this prepare themselves for future employment. This was not so clearly the case in Park Ward, where women's aspirations seemed to be more directly focused on finding a job.

26. For the women in Todmorden and Brighouse, Rastrick and Elland, vocational aspiration, whether paid or unpaid, were without exception to **caring roles** and professions, particularly working with women who had similar experiences or who had suffered in similar ways to themselves. This was not the case in Park Ward, which probably reflects the enormity of the language barriers women will have to overcome before they can work at all, rendering the specific area of employment of secondary importance.

27. **Training** emerged as an important aim for the women we talked to, and was the only area where people suggested the offering might be broadened. Confidence courses were seen as an important step on the road to recovery, and the project's decision to integrate the tutor role into the outreach team was clearly the correct one. Participants discussed the positive impact of training on their **life skills**, such as IT courses leading to online shopping and sending and receiving e-mails.

28. Women did suggest **additional courses** in Do It Yourself, Keep Fit, Maths and English GCSEs, Health and Safety and functional English with interpreter support. **Crèche or childcare support** consistently emerged as a need if training was to prove possible for many women.

29. Overall, one of the most important assets that Reaching Out brought women was its **'whole life' approach**, the knowledge that its support was there never mind what problems or issues appeared. Women repeatedly referred to the programme as their 'lifeline.'

30. Although women were in general dismayed by the prospect of Reaching Out coming to an end, and many felt they might regress after the end of October 2010, there were signs of an embryonic resilience, with some determination to either **sustain existing groups** or to develop the confidence to travel to Halifax for support. The project's decision to 'fast track' the formation of a regular group meeting in Brighouse is probably therefore a sensible one.

31. Project staff discussed the **BLF target outputs**, and the need to balance the importance of these against the equal importance of maintaining a low pressure approach to the women they worked with. The fact that the training courses were not reliant on attaining target numbers brought constancy to the resource the women were using, it was felt.

32. Outreach workers were important team members in the **multi-agency support** offered to women and families, something discussed by both the staff themselves and the partner organisations they worked with.

33. Employability amongst the participants was important, but the **absence of pressure to get people into paid work** was a strength of the programme, even though it might be interpreted as conflicting with some of the target outputs. The project was also about trust and empowerment, staff felt.

34. Project outreach staff would like to see their work **recognised as a specialism** more, perhaps through continuing professional development or a professional qualification. Future projects would benefit from more formalised peer review being available for solo team tutors.

35. Both outreach workers and volunteers would like to see their **existing skills utilised more fully**, and gave examples of staff with expertise in complementary therapies that had not been exploited at all. This was not the focus of Reaching Out's offer but could be considered in future bids.

36. Some staff felt that the **management structure** had hindered project development, because the team manager's role had been allocated fewer hours each week than the outreach workers she was managing. There was also a feeling that WomenCentre might have done more of the partnership development and administrative work before the project's staff started, a sort of 'setting up' period at the beginning of the project's life. Nevertheless, it proved to be a strength that all the team had been involved in developing the project and had a sense of ownership because of this.

37. Outreach workers felt their **roles had been unclear** at first and there was some evidence that this lack of clarity for them had delayed the establishment of a functioning and trained volunteer team. They also felt that dedicated office space in the target areas earlier would have been beneficial. Setting up an outreach service in Calderdale was breaking ground for WomenCentre and the organisation has already learned from the experience as the project developed. Future funding bids will take learning from the staff team's experience into account.

38. Both staff and volunteers were proud of the strengths and successes of Reaching Out, but there was evidence that the **project team** had been a difficult one to build, and that there were tensions between the outreach and volunteer teams. One suggestion was that volunteer support might be built into case plans earlier, something that would need a senior management steer. Staff also felt that more time for team building should be designed into any future, similar initiatives.

39. The project outreach team and partner agencies both talked positively about their **reciprocal working arrangements**, and how successful these could be. These partnerships can also bring access to additional resources such as free venues and training rooms.

40. The outreach workers' close relationships with their clients mean that they are often best placed to **co-ordinate the efforts of partner agencies**, perhaps around a common assessment framework prepared by the lead professional.

41. Staff did not feel that the failure of the **counselling service** to materialise, despite a great deal of time and effort being put into this in the first year of service, had impacted much, a view shared by the participants themselves.

42. Volunteer staff we spoke with reiterated their belief that they needed to be involved at an **earlier stage of case planning**, and that they sometimes felt under utilised.

43. The **volunteering model** was clearly not as effective as it might have been. Volunteers were well trained, and often had personal experience of isolation and of using WomenCentre services, but would have benefited from earlier clarity about their roles and building them into case plans earlier. The volunteer support model is complex as volunteers receive support from the volunteer co-ordinator centrally and their case work is supervised by the outreach workers in the project's three sites. WomenCentre will learn from this experience and develop a more effective volunteer support model in future bids for funding.

44. **Partner organisations** cover a range of statutory and voluntary agencies, including local authority children and family services, mental health services, charities, the police, local high schools and Customer First. The partners we talked to were emphatic about the value of Reaching Out's service, and that its loss will leave a gap in their own provision after the end of October.

45. **Partners** described working with Reaching Out as a learning curve, in that they had gained much useful knowledge about socially isolated women through their association with the project.

46. Partners also identified the **needs-led nature of Reaching Out** as one of its main strengths. Partners agreed that delivering the resource in the target localities was itself meeting a need, and doubted that many women would travel to Halifax for support once the project stopped.

47. One or two partners referred to the fact that some of the women they referred to Reaching Out went on to find **paid employment**, further evidence of the project's impact on its participants' employability.

48. Partners felt strongly that they wanted to see Reaching Out **extended to a wider range of localities** within Calderdale, not closed down. They also felt the model could be offered equally well to men who were suffering social isolation or bringing families up on their own. This is clearly an important message for local commissioners.

49. Reaching Out finishing will leave a **gap in the resources** that other agencies can offer their clients in the project areas, something that seems most likely to impact on the project's voluntary sector partners.

