

Active Communities programme evaluation



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People's Health Trust: Active Communities Case Study Motherwell Cheshire CIO: Believe

People's Health Trust believes in a world without health inequalities. The Trust funds small and local projects in neighbourhoods that are most affected by health inequalities with funding generated through The Health Lottery. Active Communities is one of its funding programmes and grants aim to support people to create or shape local projects that will help their community or neighbourhood to become even better, and require local people to design and run these projects. Typically lasting up to two years, the grants are between £5,000 and £50,000 for each project. The programme's main intended outcomes are:

- **Collective control:** Ideas designed and led by local people. Regular participation of residents, who are empowered to lead and take ownership of the project design, delivery and development.
- **Social links and ties:** Stronger connections between people. Decreased social isolation and loneliness, and improved connection, friendships and collective support networks among participants.

Drawing on the case study visit and interviews with project staff in spring and autumn 2019, this case study explains how people came together to shape and lead the **Believe** project and shares what they have learnt and achieved as part of the 2018-19 Active Communities evaluation.

Key facts

Motherwell Cheshire CIO: Believe project
Crewe, Cheshire

£23,825
of People's Health Trust funding, through Health Lottery North West

Main activities

Drop-in sessions;
peer support; weekly support group

Key outcomes

- Improved social links and ties
- Increased confidence, knowledge, skills and assets
- Individual and collective action and control

About the project

Motherwell provides specialist support services for mothers with children who have been placed into care, or children at risk of being placed into care. The charity works with these women to help them grow in confidence and feel valued, more resilient, and emotionally stronger. Motherwell's organisational vision is given as 'Giving mothers, on their journey, the tools to rehabilitate their lives whilst living with poor mental health'.

Each participant in this project works with their support worker to produce a person-centred support plan that focuses on the following eight areas: managing mental health, voluntary work/employment, addictive behaviours, healthy relationships, healthy lifestyle, daily living skills, social networks and self-care. The support worker can help mums understand the court process and will also attend court with them if they need support or advocacy. They may also act as an intermediary with social workers, solicitors and other agencies.

Motherwell offers a specialist peer support service, which is unique to the area. 'The Peer Support' runs weekly and each week offers a new theme. These have included: managing emotions, self-esteem, acceptance, action planning and making changes. The Peer Support is a rolling support service every four to six months, and participants are referred and registered to access this unique specialist support service for that period. Referrals to the project come through a variety of routes, including social workers, health visitors, midwives and self-referrals. In total, there are over 40 women currently involved in the project.

How did local people shape and lead the project?

For women who have relinquished so much control throughout their lives, it was important that a project was devised not just for the women, but by them. Project staff encouraged participants to be actively involved in decision-making: enabling them not only to receive personalised support to suit their needs, but also to have a sense of ownership and control of their own support plan.

"So that was really interesting in that way because they had good input into what their support plan is and why we do them as we do them." (Project lead)

In addition to one-to-one support, Believe members could access peer support and group activities and were involved in shaping the format of the day-to-day activities.

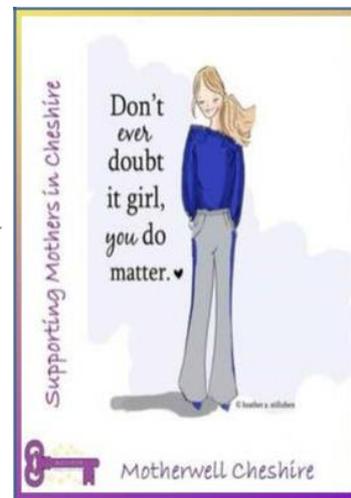
The peer support element of the project responded to participant feedback, which identified a gap in dedicated support groups for women who were mothers, yet had lost or were at risk of losing custody of their children. Peer support conversations were facilitated using a wellbeing flower, with each petal being a topic. Participants gave their input on different topics to be included. This wellbeing flower was amended when the group decided to do so, for example participants suggested the topic 'social connections', particularly in relation to healthy friendships.

Project leaders expressed their hope to enable some participants to become Service User Ambassadors for the Believe project. The ambassadors would attend some trustee meetings, feed into evaluations (both national and local), take a role in fundraising and be key in piloting future initiatives.

"In the next six months, the service users will absolutely be taking a lead in it all." (Project lead)

"As soon as you talk, they listen."

(Participant)



"To me this is a home from home."

(Participant)

What has the project achieved?

The project has achieved significant individual transformations for a small number of women who are given intensive individualised support. Participants spoke of the transformational effect of receiving some control over their lives, building trust and experiencing acceptance through the social connections they made within the project.

Improved social links and ties

For some participants, building positive relationships with others was difficult. Identified issues included feeling judged, not feeling accepted within society, having difficulty with trust, and experiencing poor mental health as a compounding factor. The development and facilitation of peer support work within the Believe project – both formally and informally – was foundational to the creation of positive social links and ties between participants.

Project leads said that the peer support and mentor schemes had been slow in making progress 'in the traditional sense'. Because participants take time to build trust, it also takes time to develop social links. However, they emphasised that the progress and development of the group must be in line with each participant's needs and should not be pushed to align with predetermined timescales. This group of women requires additional time for building trust and relationships both with one another and with the staff members of the Believe project, before peer support can be achieved.

"It is difficult to get the women to tell their whole story. It takes time." (Project staff)

Participants highlighted the project's atmosphere of acceptance without judgement both by their peers and the staff. Project activities had been a way for participants to get to know others within their community in a safe and positive environment. For some, it felt like the first time they had been able to interact with other women who knew what they have been through. In addition to the specific Believe project activities, participants were invited to take part in a wider timetable of activities available at Motherwell. This gave them the opportunity to interact with women of all backgrounds and experiences whilst doing organised activities, which widened their social networks.

Improved confidence, knowledge, skills and assets

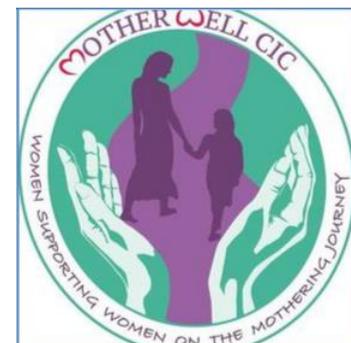
Women supported by the Believe project often had a negative self-image and lacked self-esteem, confidence and aspiration. They may have been told over a number of years and thus believe they are 'not good enough', project leads said. The involvement of social services can be tangible evidence that they are being judged as 'not good enough' by those around them. The project aims to empower these women, make them feel valued, rebuild their confidence and find their place in society.

"They have so much just done to them, so by letting them be involved and co-produce something, we are giving them that voice to be heard." (Project staff)

Believe provides support, advocacy and mediation to help women develop their confidence, knowledge, skill and assets and to improve their mental health. In order to have a successful impact upon their mental health, project staff recognised the need to holistically support participants in all these ways to address other issues in their lives, with the support of their support worker. Outcomes included improved mental health, learnt coping strategies, improved relationships with professionals and family members,



"The women from the Believe project attend things because they feel that they are isolated and outside the remit of society."
(Project lead)



the formation of positive friendships, and successful roles in the community including volunteering and as a Service User Ambassador.

Participant case study

The Motherwell Believe project had supported the participant since late 2018. She experienced heavy involvement of social services in her home life and was unable to maintain custody of her children. Through the Believe project this woman found enjoyment in simple things. She attended baking sessions and a regular 'Walk and Talk' in the park, and developed friendships with a peer group who became genuine friends outside of the project.

As part of the project, a support worker attended social services meetings with this participant. In the past, she had been banned from some of these meetings due to her outbursts, feeling that everyone was "ganging up" on her and that there was no one there on her side. The project support worker helped her build a more positive relationship with the professionals by preparing for the meeting with her, making a note of her questions, and speaking on the participant's behalf during the meeting if needed. The participant said that this support was given with "zero judgement". She experienced acceptance both from the support workers and her peers at the Believe project.

Over time, this participant became involved in voluntary work. This was her biggest milestone so far. With the assistance of her support worker she was given the opportunity to start volunteering at a familiar social supermarket on two days each week. This opportunity built her self-confidence and she took on a further day of weekly volunteering at a soup kitchen. It felt like a "huge step" for her from when she joined the Believe project, to the point where she could volunteer for three days a week. It had been a great achievement and she was very proud.

"I don't think I would be where I am if it wasn't for Believe. I would be in an even worse state." (Participant)



"I don't think I would be where I am if it wasn't for Believe. I would be in an even worse state."

(Participant)

Individual and collective action and control

Believe project participants were invited to take ownership of their future by co-developing their support plan with their support worker. Because of the specialist offering of the project and the individual support workers, the format of support could be flexible to the needs of each participant.

Project participants also took an active role in fundraising, which is core to the wider charity and promoted collective action. Some larger fundraising events were organised, such as the Great North Swim, but participants could also get involved in much simpler tasks, such as setting up a tombola. The project team used these events and the organisation of them as an opportunity to support and enable participants to build friendships and improve their confidence by pulling together to achieve something.

"It encourages them to become part of the charity and not just a service user." (Project staff)

During the second visit, participants described a social media marketing campaign they had undertaken. Pebbles, painted with themes of mental health and Motherwell, were hidden in the park for local residents to find and hopefully then share a post about on social media.



Longer-term outcomes

"The list could go on and on about what this place has done for me"

Project leads are clear that regaining custody of children is not a long-term aim of the project. Instead, the long-term focus is to support a vulnerable woman to enter the Believe project "as one person ... and leave an entirely different person" (Project lead). Some women struggled with this concept. If a participant has made great progress over a period of several months, despite a lifetime of problems, it can be difficult to understand why social services are not able to recognise this progress. Many participants have been disheartened to know that it will not result in their children being returned to them. Support workers try to maintain momentum in these cases and assure the participant that progress is still positive for her own health and wellbeing.

"It is still really tough in regards to what is happening with the children but she is trying really, really hard to turn her life around." (Project staff)

The project's far reaching outcomes in participants' lives were hoped to be sustainable. For example, one participant had a strained relationship with the paternal (custodial) grandparents of her children, but through the support and mediation of her support worker she had been able to 'build bridges' and engage in positive contact with the children. This had a positive effect on her mental wellbeing.

Participant case study

The participant has been attending the Believe project for around 6 months. Prior to joining the Believe project, her mental health was poor and she had strained relationships with members of her family. Her doctor had initially recommended that she accessed the counselling service at Motherwell, but she was not ready as her mental health was in severe decline. Later, a friend who had already accessed support through Motherwell recommended that she contact them. Through this peer recommendation, she sought support and Motherwell directed her into the Believe project.

As part of the project she attends the 'walk and talk' in the local park every other Friday. She recently enjoyed the pebble painting (painting pebbles in the theme of Motherwell Believe project - participants then hid them around the local area as a social media marketing campaign to promote the charity). She has also been active in the fundraising efforts too.

An important aspect of the Believe project for the participant has been her ability to make their own decisions. She feels, had the support being like school, where everything was set out and you were forced to come, then the women simply wouldn't come as they are the type of people who never got on well in school. Secondly, the importance of the support worker was highlighted. She feels that she was able to access support without judgement.

"I adore [the support worker]!" (Participant)

Through the project, the participant has developed new connections, she has gained access to counselling services and has felt as though she has found a safe place. The project has been able to address the issues within her family, not only the issues around the social services involvement with her child, but also with her own mother, who has also found support through Motherwell.

"Without this place, I would not be here today." (Participant)



"It is just lovely to see her in that environment where she is just one of them."

(Project staff)

What has worked well?

- **Strong leadership.** Staff described the project leader as ‘positive’ and ‘a forward thinker’.
- **Personalised support.** Project staff said that the level of tailored and individual support Believe provides wouldn’t be available within statutory services and the service provided at Motherwell is essential in plugging this gap.
- **Building trust.** It has taken time for Believe to build positive relationships and create a sense of trust between participants and the charity. It can be difficult for participants to lower their emotional barriers and feel safe.
- **Being ‘trauma-informed’.** Those working within the project were experienced in working with vulnerable women with a strong understanding of the complexities of their lives and the challenges of supporting them.



What are the lessons?

- **Quantitative targets ‘underrepresent impact’.** The Believe project struggled with People’s Health Trust’s funding requirements, which require a specified target for the number of participants engaged, and then tracking updates against this figure. Project staff were confident that their project had reached some of the area’s most vulnerable and socially isolated women, but their engagement pattern may be erratic.
- **Challenges in peer support.** Those involved in the project understand that peer support among the demographic of the women they are engaging must occur incidentally rather than directly, and over time. "Our main learning is that it really needs to be a ‘doing’ project, so whether that is cooking or crafts. Sitting around together was too much intimacy. They need time to build trust." (Project staff)
- **Costs may be hidden.** Project staff did not anticipate the scale of travel and other costs to enable participants to attend. The project struggled to meet these costs.
- **Putting women ‘in the lead’.** Participant autonomy and ownership over their own support increases retention and gives people control. The project leader noted participants needed a ‘starting point’ to make decisions, with staff giving guidance (options) and support, so that participants can make the decisions based on this.

"What I have learnt over the project is that each case is totally different, everybody needs you to work with them in such as different way. Some need a more Mum approach, some of them need quite remote, set back and not over familiar. It is just about getting to know the Mums and them getting to know you."

(Support worker)

The future

The sustainability of the project has been a focus for the lead applicant and project leader from the start. Building participants’ voices through the Service User Ambassadors and development of social enterprise are expected to provide participants with a true sense of purpose and a stake in the group’s success, which they hope will provide strong motivation to stay engaged and so bolster them against setbacks.

The focus of any extensions to delivery would be the recruitment of a second support worker, to enable more time to be spent to get the peer support element of the project off the ground. The “icing on the cake” would then be for the project to hire their own counsellor, reducing waiting lists. In addition, there has been interest in the project from the prison service, who approached the charity to learn more about the work of Believe. This demonstrates their positive impact, and the project lead has considered how an expansion of the project could reach women who have recently been released from prison.

