

# Asha Women's Centre Ten Years On: Choice and Empowerment

Jenny Roberts  
Asha Women's Centre

25 June 2010

# The history of the Asha Centre

- Originally a probation facility
- Supportive environment for group work programme
- Focal point for community agencies
- Since 2002 an independent voluntary organisation

# After 2002

- Noticed by the Prison Reform Trust
- Visited by the Treasury, the Home Affairs Committee, the Lord Chancellor and many others
- Used as a model by the Ministry of Justice for demonstration projects
- Commended in the Corston Review
- Financially supported by Ministry of Justice

# Specific characteristics of the Asha Centre

- Women-only – safe and accepting
- Women-centred – expert and responsive
- Generic – does not stigmatise specific groups
- One stop shop – mobilises resources for women with complex problems
- Voluntary sector: non-judgmental
- Very flexible

# What the Asha Centre provides

- A warm, welcoming and friendly environment
- Safety – women only
- Security
- Anonymity
- Personal plan
- Signposting
- Advice surgeries
- Help in planning how to move forward
- Courses and workshops
- Mentors
- Opportunities
- Outings
- Crèche
- Help with transport
- Rural and prison outreach

# Who Refers the Users?

- Health professionals
- Criminal justice services
- Social services
- Women's Aid
- Job Centres
- Citizens Advice
- Home Start
- Many other local voluntary organisations and key individuals

# Needs of Asha Centre users

	<i>2007</i>	<i>2006</i>		<i>2007</i>	<i>2006</i>
Abuse	<i>34%</i>	<i>38%</i>	Jobs/Training/Education	<i>37%</i>	<i>55%</i>
Legal	<i>10%</i>	<i>9%</i>	Drug/Alcohol abuse	<i>27%</i>	<i>26%</i>
Housing	<i>31%</i>	<i>26%</i>	Mental Health	<i>51%</i>	<i>64%</i>
Children	<i>48%</i>	<i>36%</i>	Bereavement	<i>32%</i>	<i>34%</i>
Partner	<i>40%</i>	<i>34%</i>	Isolation	<i>55%</i>	<i>64%</i>
Money/Debt	<i>33%</i>	<i>34%</i>	Domestic Violence	<i>28%</i>	<i>30%</i>
Self Harm	<i>27%</i>	<i>18%</i>	Low Confidence/Self Esteem	<i>60%</i>	<i>98%</i>
Eating Disorder	<i>7%</i>	<i>16%</i>	Anger	<i>37%</i>	<i>28%</i>

# Needs of Asha Centre users

- Over half claim a mental health problem and 40% are referred by mental health staff
- Very similar problems presented, regardless of source of referral:
  - History of victimisation at hands of men
  - Low confidence and self esteem
  - Poverty and isolation
  - Single parents
  - Low achievement
  - Living on benefits

# Needs of offenders (1994 sample)

Comparative prevalence in court reports of problems linked to offending	Female n=180	Male n=1117
Accommodation problem	+10%*	
Looking after home	+22%**	
Financial problem	+22%**	
Living alone with children	+23%**	
Family/relationship problems	+19%*	
Alcohol (offence-related)		+13%*
Physical health problem	+14%*	
Mental health problem	+36%***	
Interpersonal skill problems	+13%*	
Self esteem problem	+39%***	
Taking responsibility/control	+11%*	



# Outcomes

- Self reported improvements in functioning (confidence and self esteem, mental health and seven other areas)
- Participation in courses and programmes
- Acquiring skills and qualifications
- Progression to further education, training, employment and voluntary work

# Towards a paradigm?

- Original model of change only a partial rationale
- The desistance goal for offenders
- Empowerment
- Choice

# Encouraging (the Exercise of) Choice

- Women's roles
- Socially excluded women's choices
- Limited role of casework
- Abundance of training and personal development opportunities
- Users' own space
- Individual plans and peer groups
- No boundaries

# Supporting Empowerment

- Women only setting
- Women-centred = expertise
- Empowerment group programme
- Peer influence and support
- Staff and tutors as role models
- Skills and qualifications
- IAG
- Creche and transport
- Opportunities to contribute

# The Swimming Analogy

- Opportunity
- Women-only setting/pool
- Exercising the (choice) muscles
- Peer group influence
- Tutor leadership

(Picture: Anna Gordon)



# Asha Women's Centre

10 Bath Road,  
Worcester, WR5 3EJ

Tel: 01905 767552

[ashaproject@btconnect.com](mailto:ashaproject@btconnect.com)

Jenny Roberts

01584 881283

[candjroberts@onetel.com](mailto:candjroberts@onetel.com)

