

LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY

THE WAY FORWARD EVALUATION – SUMMARY

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September 2015

www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk



Summary of evaluation findings

Introduction

The Way Forward Project was set up in January 2013 as a prototype approach aiming to identify and engage with girls and young women who were slipping between existing offers of service provision and who would otherwise enter adulthood with severe and escalating levels of disadvantage. The project is located within the WomenCentre, Halifax a provider of gender specific services based in the voluntary sector. This report presents the findings from an evaluation of The Way Forward conducted by the Centre for Health Promotion Research, Leeds Beckett University. It presents evidence about the project's journey, young women's needs, the outcomes for young women as a result of engagement with the project, the operation of the project, multi-agency working and overall learning from the project.

Background

It has been argued that women's centres produce improvements in wellbeing and can be a viable and effective setting for providing mental health interventions to meet client needs (Nicholles and Whitehead, 2012, Hatchett et al., 2014). Moreover, evidence suggests return on investment in women's services, in terms of social value and savings from reduced demand in areas of health, reoffending and housing. Women's community services can support clients in making positive changes to their lives, reducing demands on other service such as police, courts, offender management whilst improving outcomes for their children (Nicholles and Whitehead, 2012). This evaluation will contribute to this evidence base about the work of women centres by exploring The Way Forward Project's approach to identifying and engaging with girls and young women and by assessing the extent to which the project has met its aims and objectives.

Evaluation aims and objectives

The evaluation used a mixed method approach including data from focus group discussions with young women, focus groups and semi-structured interviews with project staff and stakeholders and desk-based analysis of monitoring data. The evaluation sought the views and experiences of Way Forward staff, stakeholders and service users, in order to address the following 5 objectives:

Firstly to investigate how and in what ways The Way Forward has made a positive difference to the life trajectory of the girls and young women encompassed within its remit;

Secondly, to identify the ways in which The Way Forward operates and delivers its provision, identifying the factors that are important in developing and supporting progress. This included an assessment of the importance of the engagement worker role;

Thirdly, to examine how The Way Forward works within a multi-agency setting, and to ascertain what this means for the success of the project including

how the project informs local decision making and commissioning arrangements.

Fourthly, to examine the economic case for The Way Forward, tracking contributions in relation to added value and examining sustainability.

Finally, to map the potential replication of The Way Forward as a model that could be applied within other areas.

Key Messages from the Evaluation

1. The Way Forward is an example of effective, gendered, personalised, preventative approach with young women at risk.
2. Young women using the Way Forward Project have trust and confidence in it.
3. Young women using the Way Forward have high levels of need and distress that are not recognised or do not reach the thresholds for other services.
4. The Way Forward leads us to consider how many fewer women might be in abusive relationships if young women developed resilience and self-esteem through projects such as this; and how many fewer children would be involved in child protection proceedings or in local authority care if young women were supported in their own right and not just in relation to parenting abilities/capabilities.

Overall summary of evaluation findings

- The Way Forward Project has succeeded in identifying and addressing unmet need for 165 young women.
- The Way Forward Project provides a good example of preventative, early intervention work with young women from which critical success factors can be identified. These are:
 - Its person-centred, flexible and adaptable approach
 - The gendered approach
 - The skill, commitment, empowerment and supervision/support of the Engagement Worker
 - The embedding of the project within the voluntary sector based WomenCentre, with a specific holistic ethos, high levels of knowledge and expertise in relation to issues for girls and women, and strong local operational and strategic links.

- The Way Forward has put young women at the heart of the project. It exists solely to offer effective support and encouragement to young women at times of vulnerability and the original expectations of the project have had to give way to the experience of the contact between the Engagement Worker and each young woman. This central position of young women themselves has produced publicity and language for project publicity that speaks to other young women. It also kept the whole project committed to the reality of the lives of each individual young woman, resisting the management temptation to oversimplify or constrain for ease or control of service delivery.
- The Way Forward was developed and continued to hold a cross borough perspective. It remains concerned with the lives of young women across the communities of Calderdale who fail to find the help they need at critical times. The Project therefore attends not only to the situations and needs of those engaging with the project but also to those who have not been reached or have failed to engage successfully.
- The cross agency involvement in the Project has been fundamental to maximise reach as well as enabling organisations to learn together about the needs and lives of young women at times of vulnerability as well as the current local service availability and response.
- The Way Forward Project has benefitted and been dependent on the flexibility of its funders, the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and Lankelly Chase, to enable it to keep true to its core intention to firstly get to know about the needs of young women and then to respond to these as helpfully as possible. The Project's understanding of the nature of its work has been growing throughout and the Project continues to learn and adapt.
- The Project has enabled staff within WomenCentre to observe and analyse the lives and experiences of young women at times of risk and crisis, to begin to explore patterns beneath the widely diverse nature of each young woman's experience. The Project has not been able to develop any greater level of depth of understanding at this stage but is continuing to analyse project data and investigate possible patterns further.
- The Way Forward Project has shone a light on the experience of young women in relation to other services and the systems within which these operate. For example it has enabled an initial view of the journeys of young women from a first point of contact with services and their experience from this point onwards. Points of referral into the Way Forward Project are from a wide range of agencies, thus The Way Forward has in particular provided more generalist follow on support for young women exiting from Youth Offending or CAMHS

intervention. The Engagement Worker has sometimes found difficulty in supporting young women into other, more specialist services.

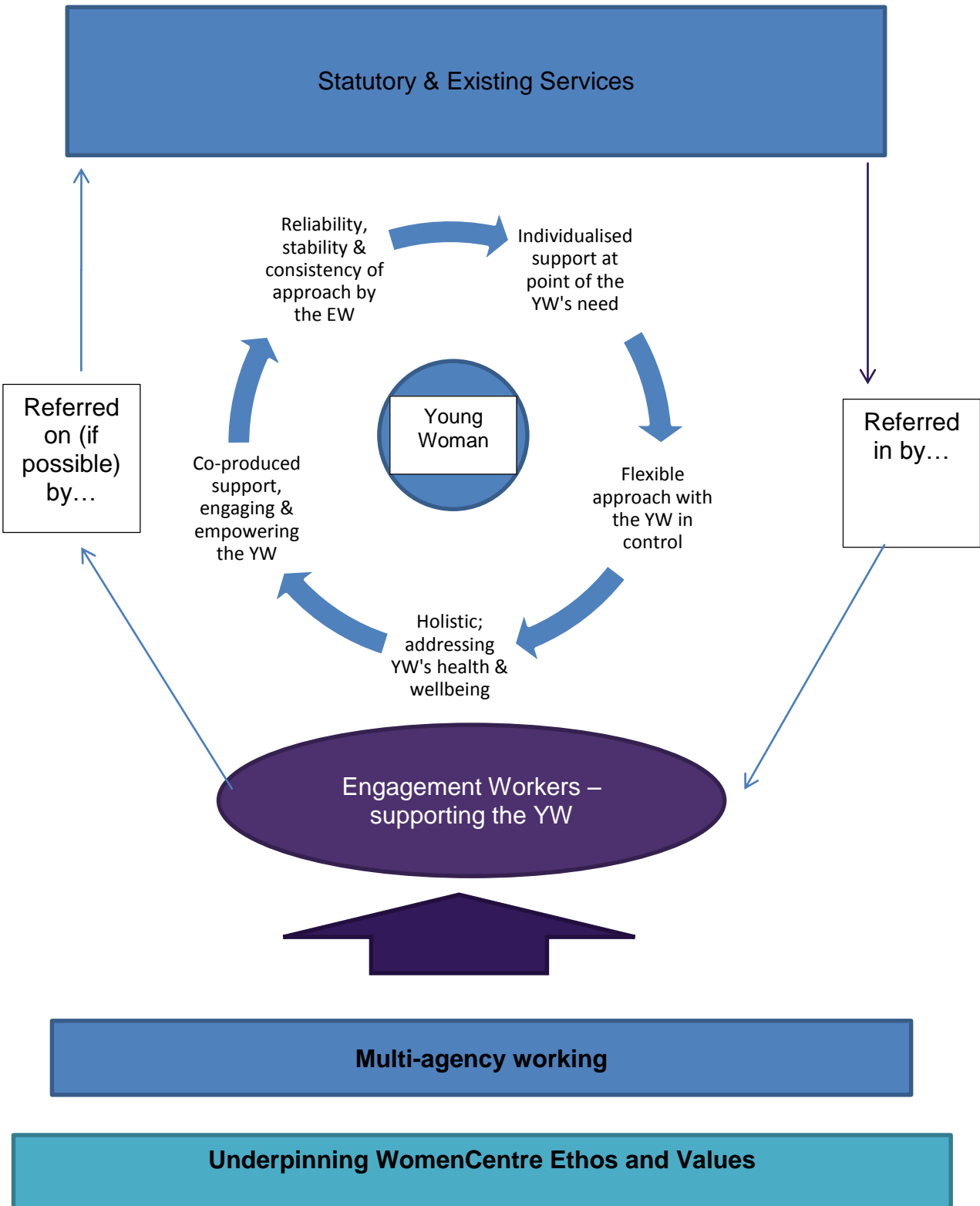
- Listening closely to the experience of young women at a time of need has enabled the Project to understand the impact of the current system on their lives and can clearly see so many missed opportunities. This is an area that may benefit from further focus.

How The Way Forward Works

This model attempts to capture the unique aspects of the project in terms of a gendered approach. The young women are at the centre of it. Importantly the project revolves (or fits) around the young women rather than vice versa as indicated by the directional arrows. The nature of the service is that it offers individualised, holistic support at the point of need enabling young women to be (and feel) supported, engaged and empowered. This occurs primarily through the young women's relationship with one of the Engagement Workers. The nature of the relationship is flexible support, building trust, having space and being listened to all of which are of paramount importance. The relationship develops solely on the young women's terms which is another key feature of the project enabling the young women to have control. The key mechanism of the project is that provided Engagement Workers as indicated by the central positioning with the model.

Underpinning the project is the ethos of the WomenCentre approach which provides the values and philosophy of a gendered approach to women's working at its core. This, in turn, supports the multiagency working that is also central to the Way Forward project's effectiveness in working with vulnerable young women.

Figure 1: The model of The Way Forward Project



Learning from the Way Forward

- Learning captured by the WomenCentre team in the delivery of the project shows that some of the young women who engage with the project have no obvious referral routes i.e. the young women discuss their needs and their way forward can be identified however there is not an organisation/agency that can provide self-development and emotional support in relation to confidence, self-esteem, reassurance, coping strategies and resilience building. Herein is the value of The Way Forward in providing gender-specific, holistic support to young women in need.
- Threshold criteria cited by other agencies is a barrier to engaging with young women who clearly have high levels of unmet need. Young women under the remit of The Way Forward were falling through the gaps if they did not meet statutory threshold criteria. Some were also unable to work with other agencies in terms of accessing provision and some were not held by other agencies, which were also perceived negatively by the young women. This reflects that existing service provision is not meeting the current needs of vulnerable young women, and that wider statutory provision is failing in its remit to support vulnerable young women. However, as The Way Forward is a generic project without any threshold criteria it has a much broader scope and thus can meet the gender-specific needs of young women.
- The critical factor of the qualities of the Engagement Worker are central to the success of the project, (see Jones 2014) as she is able to develop trust and provide support in a solution focused approach to meeting the needs of young women, without being too focused upon outcome measures. Thus the distance travelled is considered as more important for young women, rather than specific targets that need to be met. This is related to the overall project approach in which permanence for young women is understood as crucial. This project is based around long term gain and not short term fixes.
- Learning from the project also shows the importance of the flexibility adopted in relation to the project development and delivery mechanisms. This level of flexibility and adaptability enabled the project to respond to young women's individual need and experiences. The funders of this project were also important in enabling this approach.

Issues for consideration

Whilst the Way Forward has successfully established an effective approach to engaging with young women with a variety of need and successfully



working with them to improve their life chances, this evaluation has raised some issues which can be considered in relation to future planning. These are discussed below:

- Whilst evidence of short-term impact on participating individuals has been demonstrated, it is important that the medium and longer term impacts are captured over time. Nevertheless, it will be challenging to capture such data given the nature of the project and its work.
- Whilst stakeholders have reported positive perceptions of The Way Forward, evidence has shown that the project is working in a twin track manner both as an early intervention approach and as a holding point. The project is early intervention in the sense that it is acting as a mechanism to capture young women before their needs escalate into demands upon adult services and thus has a preventative focus. The project is also 'holding' young women and offering case work in instances where other provision is not available. This flexibility of delivery may not be possible within all gender-specific services.
- The sustainability of continued delivery needs attention given the short-term nature of the funding cycle, and the issues with referring young women on. If The Way Forward ceases to exist, what will happen to the young women currently being 'held' given the difficulties raised in referring on, and the issues associated with threshold criteria specified by other agencies?
- Further research needs to be considered in relation to two key areas:
 - Firstly, the impact of the Vanguard approach upon The Way Forward requires exploration.
 - Secondly, the economic and social impact of The Way Forward requires a more robust and detailed analysis.

References

Hatchett, V., Tebbet-Duffin, U., Pybis, J. & Rowland, N. (2014) Mental Health Provision in Women's Community Services. Lutterworth: BACP.

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