



An evaluation of the Refuge Access for All Project

Creating a Psychologically Informed Environment in Solace Women's Aid services across five London Boroughs



Acknowledgements

The full report evaluates the work of the “Refuge Access for All” project, carried out by Solace Women’s Aid with consultancy, support and evaluation from AVA (Against Violence and Abuse).

For the full report go to www.solacewomensaid.org/peaceofmind

Thank you to the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) who funded this work which was a partnership between Solace Women’s Aid, AVA and the London Boroughs of Enfield, Barnet, Haringey, Islington and Camden.

We extend our sincere thanks to all our partners, service users and staff for their commitment, enthusiasm and contributions.

“ The introduction of a Psychologically Informed Environment has been transformational for the refuge residents and staff at Solace Women’s Aid. ”

Executive Summary

As a response to the increasing number of women coming into refuges with mental health and drug and alcohol issues, Solace looked at how we could provide a more inclusive response to women’s needs and recovery from the trauma they had experienced. The Refuge Access for All project was established to improve our response. At the heart of this was the creation of a Psychologically Informed Environment (PIE) across Solace Refuges.

The evaluation shows that:

- The project led to a significant measurable increase in the understanding and confidence of staff in dealing with issues around mental ill health and substance use.
- Refuge residents reported measurable improvements on a trauma informed practice scale over a period of only six months, showing an impressive impact on outcomes.
- The play therapy made a significant difference in the behaviour and emotional well-being of children and their mothers during their stay in the refuge.

Recommendations

The introduction of a Psychologically Informed Environment has been transformational for the refuge residents and staff at Solace Women’s Aid. There are lessons from this, not just for Solace, but for commissioners, policy makers and other providers.

For Policy Makers

- The introduction of a Psychologically Informed Environment across five London boroughs has had a dramatic effect on Solace refuge residents’ well-being in a short space of time and for limited additional spend. This provides a cost effective model for rolling out across the refuge sector.
- The provision of, and access to, adequate and appropriate mental health and substance use services outside of the refuges was the single biggest barrier to the success of the project. This needs to be addressed if survivors of domestic abuse are to be supported to rebuild their lives post abuse.

For Commissioners

- Commissioners should consider funding the investment needed to create a Psychologically Informed Environment when commissioning services.
- Invitations to tender should ask bidders to set out the steps they have taken, or will take, to ensure that their services are psychologically informed.

For Service Providers

This evaluation shows that a modest financial investment and a strong management commitment can create a Psychologically Informed Environment that is transformational for service users and staff. The initiatives that form part of this project, such as reflective practice, training in mental health and drug and alcohol use, play therapy, psychologically informed key worker sessions, and expert support in response to trauma will not be new to many service providers in the domestic abuse sector. However, providers who are not already doing so should consider all of the elements of this programme in developing their services. The advantage of bundling a set of initiatives under the PIE umbrella, with a clear narrative to underpin them, cannot be understated.

“ Refuge Access for All is a pioneering attempt to apply PIE principles to a refuge setting. The project was motivated by the lack of suitable support in the domestic violence sector for women with complex needs, in particular those women experiencing mental ill health and/or problematic substance use. ”

Refuge Access for All - Goals & Methodology

<h3>Goal 1</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To improve access to refuges for vulnerable women and children outside of individual borough boundaries through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Smooth transfer of cases where a woman is supported in the locality she is fleeing. Early access to borough based services in her new area. Structures in place to enable move on from the refuge and continuation of support/ care. 	<h3>Goal 2</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a Psychologically Informed Environment (PIE) within refuges with the aim of improving access to and support in refuges. 	<h3>Goal 3</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Set up a fully representative steering group including women in refuges.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop pathways & processes. Partnership meetings to gather intelligence, develop proposals and reach agreements on joint work between mental health, drug and alcohol and refuge services. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review of Refuge Assessments. Review of Solace Policies and Procedures undertaken by AVA (Against Violence and Abuse). Create a mental health training programme for staff to ensure the sustainability of the project. Embed reflective practice processes. Assessment of other elements of PIE through refuge focus groups. Provide Play Therapy for children with linked support for mothers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Put service user experience and partners expertise at the heart of the project to ensure a comprehensive and robust evaluation. Establishment of a steering group to include representatives from each of the participating local authorities, Senior management and project staff from Solace Women's Aid, AVA, and members of the Solace PIE Service Users Forum.

About Psychologically Informed Environments

The aim is to develop a service culture that is reflective, thoughtful and compassionate. To achieve this, staff are introduced to insights and principles from psychological approaches to working with people with complex needs. The aim is for staff to understand, and keep in mind, the connections between thoughts, emotions and behaviour.

Key element 1: Development of a psychological framework	The aim is to develop a service culture that is reflective, thoughtful and compassionate.
Key element 2: The physical environment and social spaces	Create a non-institutional, safe and welcoming service that facilitates interaction between staff and clients, with a culture of health and well-being.
Key element 3: Staff training and support	Staff competencies and confidence are developed in working with people with complex trauma.
Key element 4: Managing relationships	Relationships are recognised as the key tool for change. The impact of positive peer relationships is harnessed and clients with complex needs are not excluded.
Key element 5: Evaluation of outcomes	Outcomes are collated and analysed in order to understand and verify what works and to support continuous learning and improvement.
Additional element: Reflective practice	Practitioners have argued that a better description of PIE would include 6 areas. Reflective practice was incorporated into the Solace pilot model.

“ Solace Women’s Aid should also take every opportunity to share the success of this project – to achieve such clearly measurable results in such a short space of time is remarkable. ”
 Evaluator

Key Findings

1. The project has clearly resulted in fewer women being refused admission because of mental health needs.
2. Confidence levels amongst staff in dealing with mental health and substance use issues increased significantly during the period of the pilot.
3. Staff understanding of issues around mental ill health and substance use improved significantly during the project.
4. Staff felt the organisation's ability to support and understand residents experiencing trauma increased significantly.
5. Staff felt significantly more confident that they could access support at work for personal issues relating to substance use, mental ill health and trauma.
6. Managers felt that the project had met a clearly identifiable need within the refuges, and that team practice and residents experience had improved as a result.
7. All participants were able to identify at least one positive change in their practice as a result of the project.
8. Service user scores on the trauma informed practice scale rose during the project, showing that service users feel staff understand their needs and experiences, and respond appropriately.
9. The PIE Service User Forum relished the opportunity to get involved with the policy and practice changes at Solace and felt they would make a real difference to future residents.
10. Partners wanted to engage with Solace, but lack of resources in outside agencies has hampered progress in this area.
11. The children and their mothers benefited from the Play Therapy programme.

Conclusions

To create a Psychologically Informed Environment across several refuges, working with partners across several boroughs, with limited funding, was an ambitious undertaking. Despite this, it is clear from this evaluation that the project has been successful on a number of measures:

- A significant reduction in the number and proportion of service users turned away because their mental health needs could not be met.
- A marked improvement in staff understanding, knowledge and confidence around the psychological needs of clients, and how best to support them.
- Positive client feedback through the Trauma Informed Practice scales.
- Staff and managers are able to clearly identify practical examples of improved service user support as part of the project.
- A number of policy changes have been introduced with the involvement and support of the Service User Forum and managers alike.
- Play Therapy interventions have had a positive impact on children and also their relationship with their mothers.

The overarching conclusion is that the concept of the Psychologically Informed Environment is applicable to the domestic violence sector, and that the key components identified in this project can have a measurable and transformational impact on refuge residents and staff alike.

Against Violence and Abuse (AVA)

AVA is a leading UK charity committed to ending gender-based violence. We strive to improve services for survivors through our learning, resources and consultancy, and end violence against women and girls through our policy, research and prevention work. We have specific expertise on Multiple Disadvantage and Children and Young People.

www.avaproject.org.uk
020 3752 5535
Follow us on Twitter @AVAproject
Like us on Facebook /AVAproject
Charity No: 1134713

Solace

Solace is a leading London based charity providing essential services to primarily women and children who have been impacted by domestic and sexual violence and other forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG). Solace's main strategic objectives are: Provision of services, ensuring we seek innovative ways to ensure those furthest from services receive the support they need; Prevention of VAWG particularly among young people; and Partnership working to ensure the best possible support to all survivors. Our refuge provision includes specialist support for women experiencing multiple disadvantage and for women who have been sexually exploited. Our other services include advocacy, advice, group work, therapeutic support and prevention work with young women and girls.

www.solacewomensaid.org
020 7619 1350
Follow us on Twitter @Solacewomensaid
Like us on Facebook /Solacewomensaid
Charity No: 1082450

Peace of Mind
© AVA, 2017 & Solace Women's Aid, 2017

