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Pause Plymouth Evaluation

Community One

Interim Report

May 2021

SERI 
Informing Policy and Decision Makers

Pause Plymouth Evaluation Community One Interim Report

May 2021

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Pause Plymouth is a voluntary programme for women who have experienced, or are at risk of, repeat removals of children from their care. Pause provides individual, bespoke and holistic support that aims to empower women to work towards their goals, developing strategies that can help meet the unique needs of each individual woman, motivating the woman and mobilising resources to help her tackle the root causes of destructive patterns, develop new skills and avoid further trauma including future care proceedings. Practitioners assist women in navigating the myriad of agencies and services available to them and help to create a space for them to reflect, learn and aspire; helping them to avoid or break this cycle.

SERIO, an applied research unit at the University of Plymouth, is conducting an evaluation of the Pause Plymouth Programme. This evaluation will gather findings and evidence of impact and allow us to better understand what works and what doesn't.

To date, evaluation activities have centred on conducting qualitative interviews with Pause women in Community One, both at the start and towards the end of their engagement with Pause, as well as a focus group with the practitioners responsible for the programme delivery. As the evaluation progresses, this methodological approach will widen to include further interviews with practitioners, qualitative interviews with Community Two women, as well as taking on board the stakeholder voice.

This interim report provides findings from the Community One women.

Key Findings

- Women highlighted trust, and the acceptance of help, as a challenge at the beginning of the programme, but over time it was evident that women were able to foster a relationship of trust and respect with their practitioner. The success and positive change the women had been able to make during the programme was directly attributed to the quality of this relationship.
- Covid-19 had huge implications for the delivery of Pause. All women identified Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdown as a major challenge, with restrictions resulting in women being unable to meet with practitioners face to face, attend group activities, and having to be confined to their homes. Practitioners however, through their creativity and commitment, were still able to maintain their relationships and offer support around these restrictions. This saw all women make positive changes on the programme.
- Both practitioners and Pause women felt that the Sunflower Centre, as a women-only outreach venue, was the best place for Pause to be located. Access to the wealth of other support all under one roof was identified as a major benefit, as well as providing the women with a safe space in which to mix and form supportive friendships with women in similar situations. The women were also comforted to know that they would be able to see their practitioners after the programme ended when visiting the Sunflower Centre.
- The unique and compassionate trauma informed model adopted by Pause was appreciated and recognised by women and practitioners alike as a different approach than that taken by other services. Pause was identified as providing a programme tailored to the individual, where women felt that they were listened to, not judged, and

supported consistently without reprimand for any negative trauma related behaviour they may display during the programme; which in comparison may have resulted in them being discharged from other support services.

- Findings suggest that Pause generally had a positive and significant impact on the women engaging with other services including GP, dentist, housing and social services; and was associated with improved outcomes for women. Women felt at the end of the programme that they were more independent and capable of making and managing appointments going forward.
- It is evident from the data that significant improvements to levels of confidence and self-worth were experienced by women engaged in the programme. Women also reported the benefit of learning new skills, behavioural responses and coping mechanisms, which had helped them address past traumas and ongoing, day-to-day challenges more effectively.
- Many of the women began the programme with limited aspirations for the future, however by the end many had formulated new goals and were taking steps toward their achievement. This included entering employment, education, or peer mentoring, as well as being in secure housing and more stable relationships. Positively all women felt equipped to avoid future care proceedings.
- Although women still faced ongoing mental health issues, they all felt that their sense of wellbeing had improved dramatically in comparison to when they initially engaged in the Pause programme, and as a result had a more hopeful outlook on the future.

Pause Plymouth Evaluation Community One - Interim Report

1. Introduction

Pause is a national model working with women who have experienced, or are at risk of, repeat pregnancies that result in children needing to be removed from their care. Pause provides an intensive, relationship-based, trauma-informed programme that aims to give women the chance to pause and take control of their lives.

The Pause Plymouth team has four caseload holding Pause practitioners (increased from three in October 2020), a practice lead and a coordinator. Pause Plymouth has been initially commissioned to work with two consecutive communities – the first consisting of up to 24 women, and the second up to 32 women. Women can participate in the Pause programme for up to 18 months – this includes an initial period of contact activity, followed by around 10 months of intensive intervention and then a gradual ‘stepping down’ in preparation for transition from the programme. For the first community of women, the Pause programme spanned April 2019 to September 2020 and for the second from October 2020 until March 2022. Women then have the option of continuing with a further period of lighter touch ‘Next Steps’ support which is co-designed with the women involved and based around their needs and goals at that time. Pause Plymouth is currently the only practice with a full time dedicated Next Steps practitioner. Pause Plymouth is based within the Sunflower Centre, a women-only centre in Plymouth operated by the commissioned VCS Pause delivery partner.

1.1 Overview of the evaluation

PCC commissioned SERIO, an applied research unit at the University of Plymouth, to conduct an evaluation of Pause Plymouth in order to develop a qualitative understanding of the intervention. The evaluation seeks to provide a qualitative insight of the experiences of the women receiving the intervention, the staff delivering the intervention, broader system engagement and impact of the project at a local level, the effectiveness of local partnership arrangements, and the impact of the Social Outcomes Contract (SOC) funding model.

SERIO wish to extend warm thanks to all the women who gave up their time to contribute to the evaluation and the practitioners who supported this. Their willingness to be interviewed, and to share their stories has been much appreciated.

2. Methodology

The evaluation uses a qualitative approach to explore the views of the women involved and practitioners for each community at both the outset and towards completion of the programme. The views collected at the outset form a baseline measure against which future findings will be compared. In addition, the views of key stakeholders and Pause Plymouth Board members will be collected towards the end of the programme. The evaluation methods include:

Baseline data collection

- Community One: Baseline face-to-face interviews with 14 women took place between January and March 2020. Interviews explored women’s sense of wellbeing; their experiences of other services, including being in child protection proceedings; and their expectations of being engaged in Pause Plymouth. A focus group with Pause practitioners was also conducted in January 2020. This explored practitioners’ expectations of Pause

Plymouth, their experiences of working with the women in community one, and their sense of wellbeing and levels of stress and resilience.

- Community Two: As with community one up to 20 interviews will be conducted with community two women at the start of their involvement with the programme.

Follow-up data collection

- Community One: Follow-up interviews were conducted with 11 of the 14 women that participated in the baseline interviews between December 2020 and February 2021. Due to the restrictions in place as a result of Covid-19 interviews were undertaken over the telephone. Although the women were open and happy to engage in the interviews, it is possible that due to the nature of telephone interviews, they may have been less likely to expand on some areas as they would have been in a face-to-face meeting.
- Community Two: Follow up interviews will be conducted with community two women towards the end of their involvement in the programme.

Interviews with key stakeholders and Pause Plymouth Board members

Towards the end of the programme, SERIO will conduct up to six semi-structured telephone interviews with key stakeholders and Pause Plymouth Board members. These interviews will explore stakeholders' perceptions of the impact of the project at a local level, the effectiveness of local partnership arrangements, and the impact of the Social Outcomes Contract (SOC) funding model. These interviews will take place in June 2022.

3. Key Findings - Community One

3.1 Introduction

This report presents findings from the women in community one of the Pause Plymouth programme, highlighting the impact which the service is having, but also providing learning points in order to contribute to a culture of continuous improvement and enhance Pause Plymouth's offering.

This section highlights the key findings from the baseline data collected from face-to-face interviews with 14 women from community one and also the follow up data collected from telephone interviews with 11 of the women from community one. It also draws on the findings from interviews with the Pause practitioners.

3.2 Experience of the Programme

3.2.1 Practitioner relationship

All but one participant had a positive experience working with Pause Plymouth. It is evident that for many the relationship with their practitioner is often the only supportive and consistent person in their lives, and the women value this, often stating that they wish that their practitioner was either their mother or friend. The importance of having someone who listens without judgement proved to be the building blocks for women to open up and begin to trust their practitioner and engage in the programme. The practitioner's friendly, open, honest, and respectful approach, coupled with their experience, advice and knowledge, were instrumental in fostering a relationship of trust and respect. The dialogue between practitioner and woman being realised into practical support gave the women confidence that the programme was indeed there to help them and would help address their specific needs.

'She's very mothering – she feels like my mum, I call her my Fairy God Mother!'

'I just think having someone that keeps coming back, even when you make mistakes, even when you get things wrong. Like they don't ignore the phone or get pissed off with you. [Practitioner] is the only person that has told me she is proud of me. So that is just important you know, have someone on your side, and believe that you can do it.'

Women had regular contact with their practitioner and were able to communicate with them easily. The practitioners were felt to be extremely flexible and understanding. The lines of communication were always open and practitioners were readily available to the women, returning calls promptly if missed. The women all fully understood that their practitioner was also supporting other women, and were accepting of the shared time.

'I still speak to her daily, she has been a big support, a big, big support. I mean some days I think I would crack up if I didn't have her around, you know.'

'I can get hold of her and if she doesn't answer the phone up she calls back in 10 minutes.'

'I think with Pause, they are such lovely women that run the service, they take in how you feel as a person and give you advice, but also not really judging what you say and what you do. My worker is really good at listening and if I had any problems or worries she just said any time of the day, it doesn't have to be on a day that I see her, I can just message her and if I wanted to I could make arrangements to see her.'

It is evident from the research that the women have formed a strong bond with their practitioners. The quality of this relationship directly enabled the women to build their self-esteem and maximise the opportunities the programme provides them. Practitioners also recognised the strength of the relationships they had been able to build and attributed this to small caseloads, the length of the programme and the access to the women's resource. The women's resource gives Pause practitioners access to a budget of £2,000 for each woman to spend across the duration of the programme. Although practitioners can use this resource at their discretion, women are not directly informed of this financial support. The importance of building these relationships was acknowledged, alongside the challenges.

'I think that is the jewel in the crown. The relationships that I have with the women that I work with, I can only describe them as profound a lot of the time. They are very intense. Far different to what I've had before. The women I work with at points almost feel like they become family because you spend so much time with them and know so much about them on an emotional level.'

'You follow the Pause ethos – being tenacious, bouncing back when you've been told to 'eff off' several times, whereas in another agency you would be told that was a risk, but with Pause you go back again and again even if that person hasn't said 'sorry'. It shows the women you are not writing them off because they've had hissy fits and teaching them to say sorry when they have not behaved in an acceptable way with professionals.'

The one to one support provided by practitioners was acknowledged as an area that worked particularly well. It was felt that this approach enabled less confident women or women suffering from anxiety to feel more comfortable and, in turn, be more open about their situations. Women felt that having the emotional and practical support of their practitioner was key in their ability to progress on the programme. The encouragement of their practitioner instilled confidence and self-esteem in the women giving them a more hopeful outlook.

'What I think is a really good thing about it is, you weren't forced to do anything, they didn't turn up and say 'well you're part of this group now and you've got to do this and this with us'. They just said they would meet with us and talk to us about it and what they could do for us and offer us. And then we spoke about it, it wasn't a decision made without me.'

'I feel like when I walk in that building I am not being judged, you know. Everyone that is there has been through the same or similar things to what I have been through.'

'They supported me, telling me I can do it when I thought I couldn't.'

Women had very few suggestions of ways to improve their experience of Pause, with all of the women overwhelmingly grateful for the opportunity and help they had received. One area which was identified, and where the women's views were mixed, was the group work offered. For some this was overwhelming and uncomfortable, however, due to the flexibility of the programme and the individual approach, the women were able to attend those activities that suited them. Nothing was forced upon the women and they had complete freedom to make use of the opportunities presented to them or not.

'They've been really good to me, they've done everything I asked, and it's always been on my terms. They've asked for my ideas and she has done it, to the best. She always put me first.'

'I don't believe she could do anything better than what she has done to be fair.'

'I don't think anything should be different because I think it changes people's lives.'

3.2.2 Challenges

In March 2020 the UK was impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, with a number of restrictions being put in place by the government in response to this; one such restriction was the stay at home order or 'lockdown'. During this time the nation was advised to stay indoors, within household bubbles, only going out for limited essential purposes. For the Pause women this came into play for a substantial part of their 18 months of support and meant that they were unable to meet up with their practitioners, attend group activities, and were confined to their homes. All the Pause women identified Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdown as the main challenge they had faced during their involvement with Pause. The isolation, often in situations of domestic violence, and the change in support available via Pause, impacted negatively on their wellbeing. The opportunity for women to see their children was also compromised as a result of Covid-19 and virtual meetings were not possible for all women. When restrictions were relaxed the pandemic still created challenges, with women required to attend court alone in a bid to reduce the number of people gathering in one space. Their interaction with other services during court proceedings often left women feeling dehumanised, alone and misinformed. Prior to the restrictions the support of the practitioner during court cases was seen as invaluable, providing not only moral support, but also ensuring that women had understood the outcomes of the case

More generally a number of women expressed accepting help and trusting Pause as a challenge during the early stages of the programme, but were surprised and grateful for the relationship they had forged with their practitioner since.

'At the beginning, I really struggled with opening up, I struggled with accepting help, like a lot of women there.'

'Having to go into court alone, my practitioner couldn't attend due to Covid, not seeing them face to face - only having phone calls.'

The role of the practitioner in essence is a challenging role, however practitioners found the restrictions brought about by Covid-19 to have been particularly difficult. Although the model of support which they were able to deliver was different to that intended it is clear that through their commitment and creativity they were able to maintain and support the relationships with the Pause women.

'The lockdown thing is the only thing that made it a little bit different. But she just adapted to it and made it work anyway.'

'I think I received quite a lot (of support) compared to some of the girls because I got seen the same amount of time. I think that is because [practitioner] made a massive effort to come out in the car and walk. Because we weren't allowed to go out in the car rather than just not coming she was driving to my house, leaving her car there, and we were still able to walk and maintain social distancing.'

Practitioners also illustrated challenges in relation to access and support from other agencies, especially that of mental health support workers and housing, this was exasperated by Covid; where many support services appeared to have just stopped. It was evident that there was a need for more understanding and compassion from other agencies when engaging with women in crisis.

'The biggest challenges are agencies that don't see the women in the same way as we do, they make judgements about them in the past or when they first meet them.'

‘One of the biggest obstacles are other people’s attitudes towards women, and Pause is about making systemic change and some of these agencies should be meeting up halfway.’

‘Mental health services can be difficult - there have been a few women that I’ve worked with where we really needed mental health services to be on board – either the women are not ill enough to be worked with, they are coping or too ill to access first level of services. So sometimes you feel you have become a mental health worker.’

3.2.3 The Sunflower Centre

Interviews explored women’s experiences of the Pause programme operating from the Sunflower Centre. The Sunflower Centre is a women-only outreach venue in Plymouth that provides support in addressing substance abuse, childhood trauma, criminogenic behaviours, domestic violence and mental health. The women and practitioners felt that the Sunflower Centre was in an easily accessible location and provided a safe space. The wealth of other support programmes available all under the same roof was identified as a major benefit, opening the door to other support services which the women may not have known were available to them. The Sunflower Centre also provided the women with a network of women which could have the potential to grow into supportive friendships. Positively, with Pause being located within the Sunflower Centre, women felt that they would be able to drop in and say ‘hi’ to their practitioners following the end of their support with Pause, as it was felt that after 18 months it would be hard to cut off that relationship completely. The only concern raised by one woman related to the potential of meeting other women at the Sunflower Centre with whom past conflict exists.

‘There is more support up there, so you can go there and have time out or if you need one-to-one contact with somebody up there, then obviously they support you up there as well.’

‘I have done a lot of groups there and it is handy to have it all in the same area. It is obviously a woman’s group so if someone who didn’t know about Pause, with it being there, they can get the advice they need to do a course they didn’t know about.’

‘When my support worker wasn’t around I was able to get hold of someone else to talk to. So there was always someone to talk to, it wasn’t like your support worker is on leave for a week you can’t chat to anyone else, there was always somebody.’

‘And obviously we are quite lucky, very lucky, in the fact that the contact doesn’t stop, which is massive, well it is massive for me – because I am used to any support I’ve had in the past it just comes to a block at the end, it doesn’t matter how close you get to somebody it just disappears. Whereas with the Sunflower Centre it doesn’t because you can go in there and they are still there and you can see them whenever they are about. If you have a problem, you can still talk it through with them, the relationship doesn’t just end. And it’s not just as simple as that, you have got all the bits that the Sunflower Centre offer too, so it is kind of like an all in one package.’

The Sunflower Centre was viewed by the practitioners as a place of positivity and safety for women to seek refuge and help. Although practitioners felt that the Sunflower Centre was the right location for Pause Plymouth, they highlighted the need for a bigger office space which was large enough to accommodate the full team and provide a quieter work environment.

“I think we are privileged to be based there, it is something that will be useful to these women. I had an idea in my head before Sunflower and Pause, about what we needed in Plymouth for women who struggle so Sunflower and Pause together fit that ideal.”

3.2.4 Experience of Pause compared to other services

The women all recognised that the Pause approach was very different to that adopted by other services they had been involved with. The main differences being that Pause focused on the individual and their specific needs opposed to a generic prescriptive programme. When working with Pause, women did not feel they were being judged and that practitioners really listened to them and their goals. The relationship was one which was given the time to develop, allowing the women to build a rapport based on trust and mutual respect. It was felt that other services did not always actively listen and that support was more about being told what to do or which courses to attend, in contrast to Pause which supported women to make their own choices and guide them in the right direction. It was also evident that through their experience the women had a mistrust of social services and other related support services. It was recognised that, unlike other services who focus on the children, the Pause practitioner was there to support the women.

‘I don’t think they listened to me. That’s the thing with Pause, they sit down and listen to you.’

‘I think Pause is one of the better services I have been involved with. They work very differently to the work that I’ve done with social services and other support. I think with some support services you get criticised for what you do and that doesn’t really help someone who is suffering with mental health, or losing their children or dealing with domestic violence – you get judged as a person really quickly. And I think with Pause they don’t really judge you.’

‘It’s not really comparable because Pause is just amazing. I don’t really know what else to say about that, you can’t compare it because there isn’t anything else like it. Even other professionals, they are not the same, they are not really there...I’ve never really had the feeling that they are 100% there for you. They (other services) are always connected to social services in one way or another whereas Pause are there for you, they are not there for your children, they are not there to judge what you do wrong with your children, they are there to help you be better for yourself, and in turn that is better for the children.’

All of the women had negative experiences of other support services but felt that it was the consistency and quality of support offered by the Pause practitioner that enabled them to overcome their mistrust, and the barriers which had prevented them from change in the past. Interaction with other services had left women feeling judged, looked down upon, not cared about, and in some cases not human. Practitioners also recognised that generally other local support services didn’t recognise the women as high enough priority and often refused to engage with these women because of their behaviour, failing to take into consideration the trauma that had caused this behaviour.

Housing was mentioned by all practitioners as a particularly difficult agency to engage with. The need for women only housing remains a high priority, with women who are often escaping domestic violence or have been sexually assaulted by men both historically and recently, regularly being housed in mixed accommodation. It is evident that there is a direct impact and cost saving to other agencies as a result of the practitioner intervention and yet it is felt that this is yet to be fully recognised or valued by those agencies.

'We find that, for instance, housing within the local authority are not always as helpful as they perhaps could be. I think we perhaps find that they don't necessarily see our women as high a priority as we do.'

'But if they could see it from our point of view and from the cost saving element, then they might understand that actually when a woman's with a Pause practitioner, we're probably saving them lots of missed appointment times.'

'We're saving them time getting forms completed and information that they need and generally getting the women in a situation where they cost the services in the city less, as part of our role.'

The Pause practitioners all highlighted the ability to work autonomously and creatively with freedom and support as one of the biggest differences in comparison to previous roles. The practitioners recognised the huge challenge and stress of the job in the early stages of the programme when trying to build a rapport with the women. Although, this was balanced with the recognition that support was available from both senior management and other practitioners when required. It was evident that each practitioner worked very differently, yet were able to share ideas and best practice as a team.

3.2.5 Impact on engaging with other services

At the start of the programme the majority of the women had very little confidence or self-esteem. They were not able to communicate, avoided eye contact, and did not feel able to speak on the phone to professionals. Amongst all the women there was huge mistrust having felt abandoned and let down by previous interactions with support services. Positively, women reported in the follow up interviews as being more self-assured and felt that their ability to communicate and engage with a wide range of other services had improved.

'I can now do all of this myself, before I couldn't - I am a lot more independent now.'

'I engage better with social services now. I'm not so argumentative. And I try not to see everything as personal. I still struggle with that as well but I'm getting better because [practitioner] has helped me see that it is not always personal, you know they have got to do their job and it is not because of you.'

'I don't know about future services, I guess that I'll trust people a bit more.'

3.2.6 Anticipated changes as a result of Pause

At the early stages of the programme many women had no aspirations for the programme but wanted mainly to improve their chances of gaining custody of their children or improving their current relationship and access to their children. The women acknowledged they needed help to make a positive change in their lives and hoped that Pause could facilitate this. For the majority of women they were at a point of crisis in their lives and hoped for secure housing, mental health support and help to cope with the emotions of having lost custody of their children. Universally all the women hoped to gain confidence as a result of the programme. The desire to be more open, to trust in people and services was also highlighted. Women wanted to be more independent and have the ability to manage attending appointments and communicating with social services in a more productive way. The women wanted the support to help change their circumstances.

'I thought I would be able to try and forgive myself a little bit. And that I would get to a point where I was bettering myself, so even if I didn't get my children home that I would

still be able to do what is best for them in terms of how I act and live and what I can offer them emotionally when I do see them.'

'I wanted to get back to where I was before I was with my ex. Before I was with him, I had my own house, my boys were living with me, living a normal life, living like a normal mum, doing things that normal people do.'

In the follow up interviews all of the women, apart from one, stated that they had seen the changes they had hoped for and this was directly attributed to the support they had received through Pause.

'I would definitely say I would have got there eventually, but I think with [practitioner] being so straight talking with me, and the way she explained things... with her help and support she has made me look at things differently, analyse my worth, and I would say it is a lot to do with it.'

'I wouldn't have done it on my own. [Practitioner] has brought out my confidence, so I can now phone my doctors.'

3.3 Impact of being involved with Pause

The women described a diverse and complex range of needs which were supported by the Pause practitioners. Women were often managing situations of domestic violence and had experienced past trauma in their lives, practitioners were able to advise and connect these women to the appropriate support services; enrolling them on suitable counselling courses. The individual needs and circumstances of each woman were assessed by the practitioner and in discussion with the women practical help was offered. Due to the very specific needs of each individual woman a range of interventions and support were offered from access to education, food parcels, providing bus passes to allow attendance at medical appointments, counselling and mental health assessment, rent support, amongst others.

The contact and social interaction aspect of the support was vital and had a huge impact as many of the women found themselves isolated and vulnerable. The women considered "being listened to" as an important aspect of the success of the service and credit it with the impact the programme had on their lives. For these women Pause gave the women choices and they were not told what to do. For most women the practical support, in addition to the moral support they received, stand out as highlights from their experience with Pause. Pause use a number of tools to support the women to make sustainable change. Women are exposed to opportunities and experiences (such as arts and crafts, photography, horse riding, rock climbing, swimming and gym access) allowing them to find things that they enjoy and build on their self-esteem and self-confidence. These group activities also provide the opportunity to make strong and lasting friendships and promote peer support amongst the women. The women, through counselling, were given the tools to manage both their emotions and behaviour and unpick trauma from the past in order to move forward positively in their lives.

'She got me a debt relief order when I first started meeting her – it has been successful, I have been out of debt for 18 months plus – it's made such a difference, it's such a relief.'

'I didn't have any expectations, I don't like to plan my future – I didn't expect any change but there has been loads – emotional change, massively, I was very emotional and now I am much better at keeping it all together – it has been great.'

Practitioners reaffirmed the success of Pause having seen the positive steps the women had taken in their lives. It was evident from the interviews that the recruitment of the right people

to fill the pause practitioner role was crucial to the programme's success. All practitioners had a wealth of experience and training with several coming from social work backgrounds and all having a broad spectrum of experience with vulnerable or challenging adults. Their direct experience of the system and differing agencies gave them invaluable insight into the challenges they would face when trying to impact the lives of the Pause women. The benefit of having practitioners with such experience in and around social care meant that they also brought with them their own set of contacts and networks with partner agencies and were able to maximise the impact they had on the Pause women during their engagement. This breadth of experience and expertise shared amongst practitioners was identified as a major benefit for the team, enabling them to share best practice and ideas, whilst supporting each other often through upsetting and challenging work.

'We all pick each other's brains about things. I ask social work questions, they ask DWP ones.'

A significant majority of women reported that they had a mental health diagnosis, many with multifaceted needs. Practitioners were not always aware of the challenges facing women until they began working with them, or until they chose to divulge this information. The one woman who had a negative experience of the Pause programme felt that more training in relation to complex mental health issues could be beneficial to practitioners going forward. In her experience, although Pause had helped her to become debt free, and she had enjoyed the activities with her practitioner, she felt that Pause were unable to cope with her mental health needs and the difficult behaviours she displayed. It was also evident that the women had misunderstood the aim of Pause and felt disappointed that the programme didn't focus on working with her children. Thus, highlighting the importance of not only clarifying the aim of the Pause programme, but ensuring that the women fully understand what the programme offers.

3.3.1 Impact on the wider family

Many of the women who participated were estranged from their families or were not surrounded by any supportive family members. In some cases their life choices had seen a breakdown in relationships and in others they had not any consistent parental support for much of their lives. For some, their families had been proud of the progress they had made and the positive difference that could be seen in their lives. This change had enabled the women to rebuild relationships with family members and work to re-establish their trust and respect. Practitioners were able to support women in making contact with their children through 'letterboxing'. Letterbox contact is a formal arrangement for birth parents, relatives and adoptive parents to share information about the child when and if appropriate through letters. This is a confidential and agreed process made through the court process. This type of contact enables birth parents to keep in touch, reduce children's sense of loss and rejection, whilst also gaining a sense of their past, therefore having a mutual benefit for both mother and child.

3.4 Looking Ahead

When looking to the future all of the women were eager to engage further with the Next Steps support Pause offers. Due to Covid-19 the Next Steps support is currently carried out via telephone and zoom calls. However, both the women and the practitioners emphasised the need for this support, and that for many women it would be very difficult to end the one to one support they had been experiencing with their practitioner, often weekly or more, and to not have anything after that. Others felt it would be strange to know someone (their practitioner) for 18 months and then suddenly break contact with them and the programme. The women hoped to retain the general support of having someone to turn to and ask advice of. The

women hoped to build on what they had already achieved and continue to make positive steps in their lives with the reassurance and comfort of knowing they have a trusted support in their Next Steps practitioner.

'I just don't want to leave them! I am not sure where I will go after that. I am sticking at college, so will see where that takes me.'

'I can't ever say I am going to close the door on them. They've helped me more than you would ever know, they have literally saved me.'

3.4.1 Avoiding future care proceedings

Encouragingly all the women were confident that they would be able to build on the work they had done with Pause to avoid care proceedings again. Through the programme women were able to build their own identity aside from being a mother and see a future for themselves as individuals. Many women hoped that Pause would remain in their lives for as long as possible and attributed their current situation and growth directly to their practitioners support. Some women still harboured fears as to what would happen if they had another child and in some cases the women still wanted to have more children but recognised that this was not something they wanted currently and they would need to change first.

'They've helped more than they will ever know, I can't even explain it. They are just so good, it is not just me, and there are a few other girls that are doing so well.'

'I'm pretty sure that I have come a long way. I don't know, I'm not in any rush to have another child but if I did then I guess I am different so it would be hard for people not to recognise that.'

3.4.2 Sense of wellbeing

Although all the women still faced ongoing mental health issues they all felt that their sense of wellbeing had improved dramatically in comparison to when they were initially interviewed at the start of the Pause programme. The women felt that their confidence and self-esteem had improved and this provided the women with a more positive and hopeful outlook for the future. Many of the women still struggled with long term physical health challenges but were now attending regular appointments and prioritising their health.

'I am quite confident I am getting there, 100% getting there. If Covid hadn't have happened this year, I would have been a lot stronger, and confident.'

'My confidence is getting better, because of lockdown it went down a little bit, but I'm slowly bringing myself back up again. I had no confidence at all when I started with Pause, I couldn't even talk on the phone.'

'I will wait and see what happens in court, but I would like to say I am a lot more positive than I was last year, and again more positive than six months ago.'

'Keeping up my appointments, like doctors, dentist, all stuff like that which I wouldn't have bothered doing, I am doing now.'

This was particularly salient as Covid and the subsequent lockdowns had a dramatic effect on the women's ability to see their children and access support. Many women struggled with the isolation enforced by lockdown and recognised that it hindered their progress on the Pause programme, but recognised that Pause had made a positive impact on their wellbeing up to that point and remained supportive throughout. The women had found it difficult to adapt to

the different model of support provided by Pause during the pandemic, which saw one to one meetings, activities, and group work confined to telephone and Zoom sessions; but were grateful for the continued contact and effort from their practitioner. With not all women possessing the technology to enable them to engage via Zoom they felt their contact and progress was delayed.

The support from Pause was, however, still available, with practitioners regularly keeping in touch via telephone and continuing to build their relationships. Practitioners provided emergency support and were able to deliver food parcels, meet the most vulnerable women (remaining socially distanced) and ensure the women felt their presence.

'Fewer calls and met three times outside but recognised that some girls needed more support – in domestic violent relationships.'

'Stopped us from doing quite a lot. I wasn't able to graduate properly from Pause. Telephone contact rather than face to face – affected my mental health a little bit, because I wasn't able to go out etc., I need to keep busy.'

'Not all of us had laptops or phones that had video, so that was very difficult. To do the groups that they do at the Sunflower Centre as well, it is very hard to be involved in them when you don't have all the technologies to do all that sort of stuff.'

'More recently we have been going out for walks in a socially distanced way. We walk up to the Hoe and talk about what has happened during the week and we talk about normal things as well, which is always helpful, not anything dramatic just normal life.'

All of the women made reference to their children as a main driver to keep going when life seemed difficult. Whether that be in the hope that they would one day be awarded custody or just to be a positive, more stable, person in their lives. Other women also described the importance of having someone to talk to during difficult days. The women emphasised that the support and encouragement of their practitioner was instrumental in maintaining their motivation with the programme.

'Speaking to the kids. I know it is not as much as I would like. It is hard not seeing them face to face, but seeing them via video link or something like that, I think that helps massively.'

'Speaking to my kids on the phone, coming down to my neighbour's. Popping down for an hour or two and talk to her.'

'Keep going – I just cry! I take the dogs out, I just try to keep busy, if I don't keep busy my brain starts over thinking and I can't cope, I have to keep busy.'

4. Conclusion

All of the Pause community one women began the programme at a time of crisis in their lives. In the majority of cases the loss of their children had a vast impact not only on their wellbeing, but also their housing situation, benefits, and the ability to function on a daily basis. The feelings of guilt, shame, grief and upset described by the women manifested themselves in a number of cases into self-harm, substance abuse, and suicide attempts. All of the women interviewed were in, or had experienced, unhealthy or abusive relationships with men and lacked any positive or supportive role model in their lives. Many of the women had extensive mental health or learning disabilities and were extremely vulnerable, lacking stability and support, often throughout their entire lives. These are women that have been regularly involved with a number of services and have been consistently let down by the system. The challenge of supporting these women to realise positive change in their lives is one which cannot be underestimated. The research findings from community one shows evidence of positive change for these women. It is apparent from the findings that this bespoke and trauma informed service offered to some of the city's most vulnerable women fills a gap which currently exists in terms of support. The reality of the women's complex needs and chaotic lifestyles mean that the generic services available see women not being able to access the support they require and finding themselves in a continuous and costly cycle of interaction with a variety of agencies.

Pause Plymouth uniquely provides the time and effort required to empower women to make sustainable change in their lives through their own choices and learning; guided by their practitioner. It is clear from the findings that the provision of support to women by highly skilled practitioners is key to the success, alongside the flexibility and freedom of the programme, allowing practitioners to make use of their professional judgement to meet the unique needs of individual women through a bespoke approach. Due to the women's backgrounds of abuse and abandonment, having a reliable and trusted person in their practitioner proves to be influential in guiding women to making better, healthier choices in their lives and make that necessary change.

In turn the support of practitioners alleviates the time spent and cost incurred by other services, highlighting the positive impact that the work of Pause practitioners can have on the wider system, not just in terms of future care proceedings. With the advocacy and support of their practitioner women are less likely to miss appointments, have their cases closed by support services, or have ongoing medical and mental health issues left untreated. As evidenced in the findings, with behavioural support from their practitioner, women are able to successfully engage with other professionals, accessing vital services which in turn can aid in the reduction of domestic violence, drug and alcohol misuse and homelessness; potentially realising substantial cost saving over time across a variety of services.

The investment of money and time into each individual Pause women led to these women becoming more independent, stable, confident and hopeful. All of the women who participated felt that other women should receive this help and were enormously grateful. Practitioners and women alike expressed the need to do more preventative work, offering their support before children are removed, or in the first instance of care proceedings, to avoid women having to seek support and engage with the service when already in crisis.



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