

The Women's Centre Programme, Thematic Summary: Issue 3 | August 2018

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DELIVERING A COMMUNITY-LED WOMEN'S SPACE: REFLECTING ON PARTICIPATION

INTRODUCTION

This Thematic Summary presents findings from the delivery of the women's initiative in Cumnock, Heart and Soul, three years into the project, and one year following the opening of the physical space in which Heart and Soul is situated. The summary focuses specifically on issues around participation, inclusion and exclusion. The Robertson Trust commissioned the University of Strathclyde to carry out this research. The aim of this Thematic Summary is to share findings with others interested in similar approaches.

WOMEN'S CENTRE PROGRAMME

The Women's Centre Programme has been developed to demonstrate how a gender specific, community-led, multi-agency approach can support women to achieve positive outcomes at a community, individual and agency level.

This involves establishing a physical centre as a base for activity and adopting a whole community approach which draws on the existing assets and strengths within the community to support all women, but especially those who are at risk of negative outcomes as a result of the specific social or structural issues they face.

The Robertson Trust's interest in improving well-being for women and in supporting the development of two Women's Centres was borne out of their involvement in the criminal justice sector. In particular, their interest was prompted by the [2012 Commission on Women Offenders](#). The Commission recognised that there were a range of interrelated factors which have a specific impact on women involved in the criminal justice system, and recommended that Women's Centres should be established '*for women offenders to enable them to access a consistent range of services to reduce reoffending and bring about behavioural change*'.

The Robertson Trust (The Trust) then conducted research into existing women's centres in England, Northern Ireland and Wales. They found that, whilst a joined up model of delivery could support women in the criminal justice system, there was a risk of further stigmatising them within their communities by adopting an approach that focussed on their offending. It was suggested that a more holistic approach, which provided support to women experiencing tough times within a wider community setting could provide better results.

From the research, it was proposed that The Trust support the development of two physical “Women’s Centres”, one in a rural location, and one in an urban location, which would generate learning and provide evidence of the experiences, impacts and effects of community-led, co-productive approaches to engaging and supporting women and girls (these approaches were defined and discussed in [Thematic Summary Issue 1](#)). You can find out more about the Women’s Centre Programme in our first Thematic Summary, ‘[Introducing the Women’s Centre Programme](#)’ which includes details of who is involved, the intended outcomes of the programme, the critical factors that increase the likelihood of success, and the learning thus far. The second Thematic Summary ‘Developing A Community-Led Women’s Space’ reports on the first year of the development of the second women’s space, Kairos, in Johnstone.

Heart & Soul: the journey so far

- 2004** The Trust begins to support developments within Scotland’s criminal justice sector, including specific support for women with convictions and their families.
- 2012** The [2012 Commission on Women Offenders](#) recognised the range of interrelated factors that coalesce to have a specific impact on women involved in the criminal justice system. The Commission recommended the establishment of Women’s Centres ‘to enable [women] to access a consistent range of services to reduce reoffending and bring about behavioural change’.
- 2013** Trust staff visited existing Women’s Centres in England, and Northern Ireland. They learnt that a more holistic approach to providing support to women within a wider community setting may have better results than focussing on vulnerability or offending alone, and could avoid further stigmatising individuals within their communities.
- 2015** The Trust undertook activities to identify two sites. This resulted in identifying Cumnock, a rural area, as a site for a centre. A second potential site was not taken forward after a period of consultation. [Centrestage](#) was identified as the host organisation to support the establishment of Heart and Soul.
- A process [evaluation](#) was undertaken by Weaver and Lightowler (2017), which focused on the development and design phases of the Women’s Centres. It employed an action research methodology and resulted in lessons for The Robertson Trust about what a project of this nature requires in the early stages of development.
- 2016** A Development Worker was funded by The Trust and employed by Centrestage. A process of outreach and community engagement, alongside consolidation of the core group of local women driving forward the development of Heart and Soul was undertaken. The establishment of this core group, who participated in various and diverse events and activities alongside women participating in wider Centrestage projects across Ayrshire, was facilitated by regular contact pursued by the Development Worker within, following and between such events and activities. In this year, the Development Worker met regularly with the core group of women to discuss ideas that would inform the development of Heart and Soul.
- 2017** Heart and Soul identified their premises in Cumnock and a process of renovation of the building began, officially opening in July 2017. In April 2017, Heart and Soul employed two project workers and two café supervisors. Following their official opening, Heart and Soul launched a four week summer activity plan which both enabled and shaped the development of future events and activities that took place during the year. While operating principally as Women’s Space, Heart and Soul opened a coffee shop on the same premises, which represents its social enterprise element.
- 2018** Running the coffee shop alongside various programmed activities and events has characterised the first half of 2018. In addition, Heart and Soul have continued to engage with

various organisations and community groups to encourage participation and engagement in Heart and Soul, simultaneously engaging with local issues and concerns. Despite being led by women from the community, the reciprocal nature of engagement and participation between Heart and Soul and local businesses, agencies and individuals is an important step to becoming 'of' the community, in terms of demonstrating value to the wider community. To date, The Robertson Trust have wholly funded Heart and Soul, to the sum of £310,000, which includes the development phase, capital costs and all staff and running costs. The Development Worker concluded her involvement with Heart & Soul in May 2018. Findings presented in this Thematic Summary reflect fieldwork undertaken between October 2017-May 2018, both before and after the unanticipated departure of the Development Worker. This issue is further informed by preceding research with Heart and Soul undertaken between May 2015 and February 2017.

Key Findings

What is Heart & Soul?

Heart and Soul is a Women's Space located in Cumnock, East Ayrshire. The premise is situated in the centre of this semi-rural town, featuring a coffee shop with adjacent kitchen space and a private meeting room.



The women who participate in Heart and Soul describe it as a welcoming, fun, friendly and relaxing space. Women feel that they can be themselves, that there is a lack of judgement and an uncritical acceptance of who they are. It is experienced as a sanctuary from the real world; some people referred to it as a retreat, a lifeboat or a space where they can regain energy and develop the resilience and strength to make changes in their lives. Many women likened going to Heart and Soul as being at home or in their own living room. Over half the women, unprompted, referred to Heart and Soul as a family. It was also acknowledged that a lot of what happens at Heart and Soul is subtle and operates at a deeper level, in and through interaction with others, such that one can only really get a sense of it by going and getting involved. Some described Heart and Soul as speaking to their "soul" or recognising who they really are, and providing healing by accepting, listening, kindness and caring, reflecting the values underpinning Heart and Soul. For some healing was achieved by directly talking about experiences whilst for others they left their issues outside and found healing through escaping from the real world for a while.

**“Whether they’ve got baggage or whether they’ve got problems going on. It’s almost as if it gets dropped at the door, picked up when they go back out”
(Attendee, Heart and Soul)**

How is Heart & Soul different?

According to those who are involved in Heart and Soul, the experience is very different from their experience of other women's initiatives, centres or services. It is not led by professionals, nor is it a service, but is community-led and it is considered to be all the better for this because it is based on genuine empathy and acceptance rather than trying to fix people or pass judgement, offering "empathy" and "therapy for the price of a coffee". Instead, then, it is a community where those involved are encouraged to contribute, to support each other according to their needs, strengths, interests and capabilities, and to share skills. This means that Heart and Soul is experienced as "a different thing for everybody", and means, then, different things to different people. It is not about activities to enjoy or simply the existence of a physical space to go to (though this is part of what it offers); it is more fundamentally about encouraging women to be a whole person, whose individuality is both respected and accepted: "here it's like it is all about you".

The Dynamics and Effects of Participation:

Who engages with Heart & Soul?

A range of women are engaged with Heart and Soul, and the diversity is something that the women seem to appreciate and enjoy. As at March 2018, 135 women were reported to be involved in Heart and Soul. Those participating most frequently tend to be middle aged or older women, and several women mentioned that they would like to see more girls, younger women and young mums involved. Whilst women from different socio-economic and ethnic groups, as well as differently abled women do seem to participate, it is primarily those who do not work full-time who are involved, in part due to the opening times.

Why do women participate?

In different ways and for different reasons, women participate in Heart and Soul principally in order to connect with others. Some get involved to have a coffee, to have somewhere to go, to learn new skills or to get involved in an activity, some to access help and support, and others because they want to offer support, share their skills and help others. Participation seems to give women a purpose and so it appears, at present, to be particularly beneficial for women who are marginalised and/or isolated, retiring or going through different transitions. There are very different reasons why women participate, and so there are a range of women who get involved as a result.

"You actually get to meet folk that maybe you wouldn't have normally met ... different age groups, different backgrounds" (Attendee, Heart and Soul).

"I was looking for a wee purpose, you know, because I'd stopped working and I was looking for something" (Volunteer, Heart and Soul).

"The classes are brilliant but it's like learning and listening to the women, their stories" (Attendee, Heart and Soul).

How do women get involved?

Unsurprisingly the routes in to involvement are profoundly based around relationships, often via other women they know, but also through other agencies or organisations and occasionally from seeing an advert about a specific activity. Many of the women described a similar process of involvement which centred on going to Heart and Soul for a coffee, being met by the Development Worker and being encouraged to get involved in something based around their interests.

“I actually only came in one day for a coffee and then the next thing I was getting a song sheet handed to me and they asked me if I wanted to sing along in the choir” (Attendee, Heart and Soul).

A lot of care is taken to welcome people in and make them feel comfortable, with the Development Worker sometimes first meeting people outside Heart and Soul and coming in with them for a coffee if they were not comfortable arriving alone. The safe space of the coffee shop clearly helps to get people through the door and to feel comfortable to then explore how they may want to get involved.

The Development Worker has also been proactive in ensuring that existing and diverse community groups feel welcome to get involved with Heart and Soul and use the space, with very different pre-existing community groups now regularly attending and maintaining their own identity as groups but also being part of and building connections with the wider Heart and Soul family: the Riverside ladies, the Rana girls, the Garnock group.

What are the enablers of participation in Heart & Soul?

The key factor which has enabled participation at Heart and Soul has been the skills of the Development Worker (who unanticipatedly departed from Heart & Soul in May 2018). Energy, charisma, empathy and understanding is recognised and valued by all the women we interviewed as being key to securing and sustaining their involvement (for a detailed list of the core characteristics and skills of an effective Development Worker required in a project of this nature, see Issue 2). The Development Worker was credited by the women we interviewed as being highly skilled, and an exceptional judge of character and so able to tailor approaches to what people would value and benefit from, and able to take people out of their comfort zones in a gentle way. The Development Worker made a particular effort to go to where people feel most comfortable, rather than expecting them to engage with Heart and Soul immediately. This helped people feel to feel valued and safe which has enabled participation, breaking down significant barriers to involvement as a consequence, which was a particular success with a group of Asian women (the Rana girls).

A feature of Heart and Soul has also been the consistency of having a physical space, open frequently and at regular times, and having the same Development Worker for the first few years of the project. Trust is an important enabler of participation and some interviewees noted that in small towns like Cumnock this is an even greater issue than other communities:

“It takes time for people to get to know the place, get to know the people in it, to trust them” (Attendee, Heart and Soul).

Time, relationships and trust are therefore crucial enablers to participation, which is linked to acceptance - that people know they can be themselves if they get involved and find a sense of belonging.

**“It allows you to be yourself within a group, you know, you don’t have to change to be – to feel you belong, you don’t have to change”
(Volunteer, Heart and Soul).**

What are the barriers to participation at Heart & Soul?

The barriers to participation tend to be associated with “real life”, be that work, children or other commitments. The difficulties for young mums, in particular, in being able to find the time to participate was widely acknowledged. Money was also mentioned as a barrier for some, to pay for activities or purchasing coffee, which operated as an obstacle even if payment can be waived. Several interviewees noted that offering more in the evenings, particularly focused on fun and food, could support the participation of a greater range of women who are in work.

Heart and Soul is also perhaps not the right fit for some women. For instance, several interviewees reflected their perceptions that younger women, as a generation, do not tend to participate in collective groups in general due to an increasingly individualised societal culture. Whilst they may participate in an activity like Zumba or go to the gym, these are activities where a collection of individuals participate in the same activity at the same time, yet independently, to a degree, rather than collectively in the sense that such activities do not require interaction with those others. This is in contrast to Heart and Soul which requires and is based on interaction, as well as other pursuits which are more community and socially focused. So Heart and Soul may not be the right offering for certain groups or they may want to reflect on how to offer spaces which allow individuals to do things alone but alongside others. There is also perhaps a question here about whether Heart and Soul wants to take a position about an increasingly individualised culture and deliberately seek to support younger women in particular to be more comfortable about or interested in acting as a collective.

There also seem to be some perceptions which are potentially discouraging women from participating. One woman reported that because Heart and Soul is next to a church, some people have got the impression that it is a religious group focused on women’s guild type activities (such as sewing, baking, crocheting). Others mentioned that before they got involved they thought it would be “airy fairy and way out of my league”. Countering or anticipating such perceptions might be an area of consideration for Heart and Soul.

A substantial barrier to initial participation is fear and lack of confidence in walking through the door that first time. Several women have noticed others walking past and looking in, and getting a sense that they want to come in, but then not doing so.

There was also an acknowledgement that there are still women who have not heard of Heart and Soul, and even if they see the adverts, some people will not have a good understanding about what it is or that it is something they can get involved in. There is always, therefore, more that can be done to spread the word, particularly through word of mouth and gentle encouragement to get involved. Some practical suggestions were offered by the women, such as having a blackboard with details of this and next week’s activities displayed, which, it was thought, could be helpful to ensure that those passing by or coming in to the coffee shop are aware of what is on offer and when.

Women also acknowledged that, at certain times, they may choose to stop participating. For instance, some women currently involved imagine that once Heart and Soul has helped them to build confidence and go out into the world, they may not want to or have time to participate in the longer term, reflecting outcomes that the [wider programme](#) seeks to achieve in terms of supporting community and social integration. Others, however, talked about how they stepped back from participating following the Development Worker's unanticipated departure in May 2018, when they felt things were happening at Heart and Soul that they did not support or agree with, highlighting that retaining the approach, ethos and culture of acceptance and inclusion is key to maintaining the participation of women currently involved.

How often and in what ways do people participate?

The women we talked to attended at least once a week. Their attendance varied each week but ranged from once a week to four times a week, with women sometimes dropping in for a coffee for an hour or so to staying for four hours. The most common response was three times a week. Some women organised their diaries and other plans around activities or events happening in a given week at Heart and Soul, whilst others attend on a specific day and time on a weekly basis, often for a particular activity. Those who primarily participate through getting involved in an activity often also dropped in a couple of times a week to catch up with the Development Worker, talk about plans for the activity or just have a chat with them and others who are around. There are specific activities on different days: for example, the Riverside ladies come on a Monday; Tuesday is for the choir; and the Rana Girls and Crafty chicks come in on Wednesday. One person mentioned that they tend to come with family and friends for a lunch on a Friday, but Fridays tend to be quieter. Others like to come just to be around people, to sit quietly with a book or a laptop, knowing there are people around and with whom they can talk, sometimes, if and when they want to.

Women contribute to Heart and Soul in a range of ways, from leading an activity (as a regular or a one off); volunteering by helping out in the café, with activities and ensuring people feel welcome; to participation, though, the women appeared to value what each other bring, particularly their ideas, stories, humour, empathy and acceptance.

What difference does participating in Heart & Soul make?

At the individual level, women explained that participating in Heart and Soul made them feel like they were part of something, and included rather than isolated. There was a strong sense of community, of family and belonging, which for some of the women had been a transformative experience: "It's made a huge difference in my life" but which had also helped newcomers to the area feel part of the community. The women we interviewed said that Heart and Soul helps them to re/connect with a purpose, to re/gain a sense of meaning, often found in opportunities to share their skills, knowledge and offer support to others and through the kinds of interactions that make them feel accepted for who they are, as well as who they have been.

For many of the women we interviewed, Heart and Soul represents a sanctuary and offers a safe place to retreat to from the world outside and find acceptance, care, kindness and support. In this safe space women can then build confidence; heal from trauma, distress and difficulties; better manage their mental health; and find greater peace and happiness.

“I’m usually the person that just sits back and just watches. But in here, my confidence has just grew so much” (Attendee, Heart and Soul).

“Coming out here, I feel has given me confidence again” (Attendee, Heart and Soul).

“This place has brought her back to what she was” (Attendee, Heart and Soul).

“You need to try and get out the house a bit more, maybe that’ll kind of stop you thinking about silly things” (Attendee, Heart and Soul).

A significant outcome for the women involved in Heart and Soul who we interviewed has been discovering a feeling of acceptance for who they are, being able to just be themselves and to have people in their lives who believe in them: “I didn’t have to fight to be getting accepted, to fit in”. The women have developed new relationships, and it has helped them strengthen prior relationships, playing a significant role in tackling social isolation and loneliness, with several women explaining that before Heart and Soul they were basically confined to the house on their own, perhaps only seeing one or two people each week. This increased social contact is having positive outcomes for not only the individual women involved, but also for their families, who are noticing the difference:

“If I wasn’t here just now, I’d be up in the house bored, fed up and nobody to talk to. It’s good to get out and talk to people” (Volunteer, Heart and Soul).

“My son thinks it’s great... he’s not used to that. He was always used to me being in when he came in from work and all the rest of it and sometimes I’m not now” (Attendee, Heart and Soul).

Heart and Soul is also helping to break down wider cultural differences, with significant benefits emerging due to the involvement a group of Asian ladies, called the Rana girls. The women recognised that without Heart and Soul there wouldn’t have been the opportunities to learn about each other’s cultures and religions, or to realise how much they had in common:

“Although they have a culture and we have a culture, a lot of it’s actually the same. And that was nice to get to know. So when you meet these ladies in the street now, they’re talking. Not having a great big conversation but they’re going, oh hi, and talking about the weather and things like that” (Volunteer, Heart and Soul).

Over time this has meant that the Rana group feel a part of Heart and Soul, and more generally understood and accepted:

“Our Rana girls, like before we came to the Heart and Soul, like we were separate but now we’re part of the Heart and Soul family in a way, our group” (Attendee, Heart and Soul).

Heart and Soul has also helped women of different ages and backgrounds connect too:

“Like there’s the age difference but I feel like now you give them the odd text, do you want to meet up for a coffee or whatever, and you kind of integrate with all these different age groups, different personalities” (Attendee, Heart and Soul)..

To what extent is Heart & Soul led by the women involved?

Overall there was a sense that Heart and Soul was achieving a balanced approach to listening to the women, being guided by their ideas and suggestions, but not requiring women to contribute too much around organising events, decision making or attending meetings where they did not feel able. Interviewees expressed concern about any change to the current balance which would then require greater levels of participation than they wanted or felt able to give, and for their participation to ever become expected or required. Everyone involved felt listened to and able to exert an influence with the Development Worker perceived to be providing effective leadership. Indeed, reflecting the learning discussed in our second Thematic Summary, interviewees felt it would always be essential for someone to fulfil this function, and they were satisfied with their level of influence. People who were involved in running activities particularly felt able to determine what happened at these sessions, and whilst they would discuss the approach and content with the Development Worker, they understood that her role was to provide and offer support and guidance to enable them to design the session they wanted to do.

The women also felt that they generally functioned well as a group, in terms of listening to each other’s opinion and accepting different points of view. This meant that decisions and developments evolved and emerged through conversation. Overall then, there was a sense that no-one was really directing it with a pre-determined plan in mind, instead decisions slowly emerged through conversation and so that it *felt* like, “We’re making it up as we go along”. However, there was a sense that some women were quieter than others and that it might be a good idea to create more formal structures for feedback and suggestions, to ensure that everyone’s voice is heard:

“I think it’d be a great idea actually just to get people to write down their ideas of things they would like to see happening at Heart and Soul. Sometimes folk – if it’s kind of sprung on them, they immediately don’t have like ideas in their head” (Attendee, Heart and Soul).

“Quite a lot of it is just sitting having a blether and then – oh – and then you’re like – oh right, well, we should maybe ask [the Development Worker] that, we should maybe see if we could do something like that. Like just general chit chat” (Attendee, Heart and Soul).

What challenges to participation arose in the Delivery Phase?

Those involved in Heart and Soul described occasions when Heart and Soul has not been a welcoming, inviting and accepting space for everyone. There have been challenges for some women in accepting others who are different from them at times. It has also been difficult for some of those who have been involved with Heart and Soul from the start to be comfortable with others joining later and wanting to participate and shape its direction. All of those we talked to, however, were uncomfortable about excluding anyone, and felt very disappointed, upset and angry when these issues emerged and they acknowledged that excluding people was against the entire ethos of and values underpinning Heart and Soul. Where these challenges did occur, they were recognised and followed up by the Development Worker.

This raises important questions about the extent to which projects of this nature can or should be *solely* led, or directed, by the women involved and what the appropriate limitations are in terms of influence. For instance, it would be unacceptable for women involved to choose to exclude another group of women, which both implies the need for direction and underlines the importance of effective leadership, underpinned by a strong value base that is inclusive and that recognises that everybody has views to express, skills to bring and a contribution to make. This suggests the need for some limitations on women's capacity to influence the direction or culture of the space where that would result in the exclusion, or undermine the wellbeing, of others.

“It’s a community run project, you can’t be going about picking faults with people that are coming along to Heart and Soul because then you’ve not got a community project” (Attendee, Heart and Soul)

At the same time, questions might also be asked as to what influence women should have over the leadership or employment of staff and who should fulfil those roles in a community-led project of this nature. Such questions were raised by some of the women we interviewed both in terms of their appraisal of the impact that the Development Worker's unanticipated departure had had on them but also in reference to the way that change came about, which they felt they had not been a part of, or consulted on.

“We’ve had a wee sort of sea change the last couple of weeks, we’ve lost staff and it’s uncomfortable” (Attendee, Heart and Soul)

“The friends that I made here are still here but we’re all like swimming about lost, just like the lifeboat’s vanished. Wow, where’s the lifeboat, can we have it back please. It’s kinda strange” (Attendee, Heart and Soul)

What helps women transition to formal volunteer or employee roles?

In Heart and Soul, there is an opportunity for women to participate in either an informal helping role, on a voluntary basis or in a paid capacity. The pace at which women are ready to assume volunteer roles or employment will vary depending on their experience, capacity and skill set. Instilling a shared value base (see Thematic Summary Issue 2) is as important as offering volunteer training as well as training in key areas such as women-centred working and supporting women. Clarity and reinforcement of roles and responsibilities are also important with specific attention to issues of confidentiality and

professional boundaries. Equally an understanding of the concept of the project and the shared vision is required. Transitioning to volunteering or employment can be challenging for women involved from the initial development phase. People's motivations and expectations can change over time as can their capacities and personal circumstances. This requires, then, both flexibility and pastoral support. It may be that the employment of women involved in the development phase should be undertaken following a period of informal helping through to formal volunteering, in order to facilitate these transitions. In the early phases then, one approach might be to recruit initial employees from outwith this group until women feel or are ready to assume these roles and take on the responsibilities such roles require.

Are there any tensions in delivering the vision for Heart and Soul?

We have already outlined the challenges that can arise in a community-led initiative where people's attitudes, values and behaviours may be in tension with the underpinning values of the project. In addition, different women have very different relationships to and needs of Heart and Soul, much of which can be accommodated by the flexible model and fluid approach taken by Heart and Soul. However, there is perhaps a tension between the perception and experience of Heart and Soul as a retreat from the real world or the community, and the vision of it as a space for women to directly confront issues that affect them, both personal and societal. It is difficult in the same space to be both a retreat from the world and to facilitate active engagement with some of the issues affecting women in the community. Whilst a focus on providing a retreat may make a significant contribution to the individual level outcomes identified for Heart and soul (for example, that women are supported around the challenges they face in their life), it may limit the ability for Heart and Soul to realise other intended outcomes, for example, that 'communities are stronger, more resilient and better able to meet their own needs and achieve their own goals' (Thematic Summary Issue.1).

“(Heart and Soul) has been a stepping stone to help me on my way to something else. But as a community enterprise, it needs to engage the community more and make a better community” (Attendee, Heart and Soul).

“This is a community enterprise primarily [so] it requires more to be going out to the community so that it can bring it back in, in terms of [generating] resources, and that would need a lot of exploring as to how you were going to – how is it going to make money? Because you can only make so many cupcakes” (Attendee, Heart and Soul)

What the extracts above reveal is the need for continuous community engagement in a project of this nature, extending beyond the development phase into the delivery phase, not only to make sure it continues to be community led and community facing in approach but for the purposes of sustainability. The social enterprise aspect to Heart and Soul takes the form of a Coffee Shop which is open to the general public, and at times, this raised some challenges or tensions in how the space was being used so as to meet its objectives as both a Women's Space and a sustainable 'community enterprise'.

Initially, Heart and Soul set times for opening the café to the general public on certain days, so that the space could be restricted for use by women on other days. They recognised, however, that this had to change to ensure that the wider community were using the coffee shop and also to build a regular client base to generate income. The challenge arose in ensuring the needs of women continued to come first

before the needs of the coffee shop, reflecting challenges or tensions between balancing both social and economic objectives that social enterprises typically encounterⁱⁱ. What Heart and Soul has achieved, and to positive effect, is a sharing of the same space for both purposes, although it should be noted that a private meeting space is always available to and for the women. It has been said that:

“It appears to add to the quirkiness of Heart and Soul when members of the wider community are using the coffee shop and a fun workshop or the choir are in full song. The feedback from the wider community has been very positive so far and indeed some individuals using the coffee shop have engaged in the singing while ordering their take away lunch” (Worker, Heart and Soul).

Key Learning from the Development and Early Delivery Phases

The learning from the development phase of Heart and Soul was initially captured in an evaluation by Weaver and Lightowler at the University of Strathclyde (available [here](#) on The Trust’s website) and summarised [here](#). We distilled the key findings into a list of key elements that a project of this nature requires in the early stages of development. These key elements informed the ongoing early development of Kairos (the second women’s space) and our learning from Kairos was captured in an update of this list in Thematic Summary, Issue. 2. Based on our learning from the Delivery Phase of Heart and Soul, the following provides a further update and additional learning on what it takes to *both* establish and embed projects of this nature, with the latter focused on the theme of participation, which is central to the community-led approach and ethos of the project.

Engagement

- Agree an inclusive, visible and clear plan for engaging stakeholders subject to ongoing review over time in accordance with the evolving needs of the project
- Engage with all stakeholders in the early stages to assess the need and appetite for a Centre, including with ‘ordinary women’
- Visit other women-centred organisations in the development phase to learn what others are doing, how and to what effect
- Ensure that ‘inclusion’ and stakeholder/community engagement is a core focus and activity throughout the delivery phase as well as the development phase
- Support women who have been involved in the development phase to lead on reaching out to and engaging with new women in the delivery phase
- Encourage the participation of existing and diverse women’s community groups to ensure its utilisation by a broad base of women

Communication

- Develop a communication strategy to ensure the flow and regularity of information between all key stakeholders, both formal and informal using a variety of media and approaches
- Agree a consultation plan that identifies who and how key stakeholders, communities and target groups will be engaged, perhaps including focus groups or surveys, subject to ongoing review

Shared vision and mandate

- Enable all stakeholders to visualise what the next steps might be, by developing a shared vision in the early stages or providing a sufficient steer
- That vision should be task focused and clear rather than abstract and intangible; it should focus on the why and the how rather than simply the what
- Beyond activities and events, the vision should be underpinned by a set of core values and a focus on the outcomes, on what it intends to achieve rather than simply how it should work
- Ensure a clear and shared understanding of the mandate for the work and mechanisms for the regular communication of that vision to a range of stakeholders

Volunteers, Employees, Host Organisation and Development Worker

- Appoint a host organisation, which in turn recruits a Development Worker at an early stage, both with sufficient capacity, skills and experience and both with a value set reflective of the overarching approach and the skills to be able to talk about values with women to guide the culture and ethos which is inclusive, non-judgmental, accepting, kind and empowering
- Establish a continuum of opportunities for participation in the delivery of the Women's Space from informal helping to formal volunteering to paid employment, and consider an informal helping role as an entry point to lead on to greater levels of responsibility
- Provide volunteer training and training to women in key areas such as women-centred working and supporting women with specific attention to issues of confidentiality and professional boundaries in advance of their assumption of volunteer roles or employment
- In the early stages of delivery, recruit initial employees from out with the core group until women feel able or are ready to assume these roles and related responsibilities

Relationships

- Support fun, passion, enthusiasm and commitment amongst all those involved
- Develop strong relationships, trust and understanding between the project funders, the host organisation, other agency representatives, and women from the community
- The manner of relating is critical to the building of sustainable and constructive relationships; it should be accepting, inclusive, non-judgemental, and kind
- In addition to encouraging community participation in the development phase, the establishment of cooperative relationships that are fundamental to the development of a project of this nature requires that the Development Worker and core group participate reciprocally in what communities and groups are already doing. Mutual exchange and support are the foundations of relationships.
- The Development Worker has a key role to play in ensuring and role modelling relationships that are characterised by the underpinning values of acceptance, empowerment, kindness and caring, in which people's individualities and diversities are respected, accepted and nurtured

Clear roles and decision making

- Establish and maintain a core group of women who will lead on the development and delivery of the Women's Space
- Ensure people feel they know what they can and can't do – as well as what they ought to be doing and when
- Identify task-focused roles and agree the expectations for the different roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder (or stakeholder group) involved

- Offer a continuum of opportunities of participation and involvement in both the development and delivery phases that reflect the needs, skills, strengths, capacities and experiences of a diverse group of women, balancing different women’s responsibilities or participation preferences
- Ensure a continual sense of progression and impact to maintain momentum and support retention. This can enable a sense of ownership, commitment and collective efficacy.
- Agree clear structures and transparent processes for making decisions and for communicating the decisions once these are made

Project planning and monitoring

Ensure a project development plan is devised, which includes:

- Events and activities across local areas using a range of methods that bring women together to encourage dialogue, participation and the development of relationships with and between different groups of women. Events are not an end in themselves but a means to facilitate participation and engagement.
- Milestones and core tasks that reduce ambiguity surrounding expectations and responsibilities, that are sufficiently structured to enable progression but remain flexible to respond to the needs of the community
- Clear boundaries and outcomes that can guide project development and delivery to provide a context shaped by the intended outcomes and the underpinning values
- Opportunities to reflect on, and formal channels through which to raise, concerns about progress and/or decision-making at an early stage
- Opportunities for training and personal development

Sustainability

- Consider sustainability in the early stages, in terms of long-term funding and leadership to continue the work so that the project is not wholly reliant on Trust funding. This should include strategies to realise both the social and economic objectives of the project.

Plans for evaluation 2018-2019

Over the next year, we will continue to evaluate the Women’s Centre Programme to identify whether and how this specific approach can generate its intended outcomes and impact. We will ask questions to understand more about:

- The **design, governance, cost, and broad activities** adopted
- The **nature of participation** by women, groups and agencies. For example, how women may experience the Centre differently to accessing support through ‘traditional services’
- Any **‘critical factors’** of a Women’s Centre demonstrated within projects. For example, the value of having a physical centre
- The **impact** for women, communities and the agencies involved
- The **factors that influence** positive outcomes, and any surprises (positive or negative)
- **Lessons learned** for future delivery or replication
- Challenges and opportunities for **sustainability**
- The **role or value of the independent funder**

The focus of the next stage of the evaluation of Heart and Soul in 2018-2019 is on outcomes and impact.

Data collection methods will include **documentary analysis** of project monitoring information, annual project plans and monitoring reports, participation records, user feedback, attendance at activities by key target groups; **observations** of key planned activities designed to engage women or spend time in Kairos to observe interactions, activities and dynamics; **semi-structured interviews** with members of the local advisory group, project team, community stakeholders and women involved in the centre's development; **mobile diaries**ⁱⁱⁱ with women involved in Heart and Soul, followed up with **individualised interviews**.

The project Development Worker / Centre Manager and the Robertson Trust Programme Manager will be asked to continue to maintain **a monthly electronic project diary**^{iv}, which will be followed up discussions between diarists and the research team.

Participatory annual '**Reflect and Learn workshops**' will provide opportunities for all involved to share and engage with learning at key stages of the projects development. Rather than a final evaluation report at the end of two years, we will share written learning from the evaluation through a series of short thematic summaries such as this along the way.

The Trust will engage with partners and stakeholders as the Women's Centre Programme develops, to raise awareness of the programme. The Trust will also share learning from the evaluation and regular updates from the programme across all of their digital channels.

Find out more

Find out more about the programme on the Trust's [website](#), or follow The Robertson Trust on Twitter [@RobertsonTrust](#) or [LinkedIn](#) for updates.

Appendix: A note on methods

The evaluation takes a participatory action-research approach, using mixed methods. This Thematic Summary was informed by the following methods:

- Informal and formal observations of activities and events;
- Mobile diaries with ten women involved in Heart and Soul (including women engaging in, volunteering with, or employed by Heart and Soul), and in-depth follow up interviews with mobile diary participants;
- Analysis of monthly project diaries maintained by the Development Worker and the Programme Manager at the Trust, which were followed up by three-monthly discussions with diarists to discuss their entries;
- Evidence also drew on the documentary analysis of information gathered or produced by the Trust and Heart and Soul.

ⁱ To cite: Weaver, B., Lightowler, C and Gillon, F (2018) *Delivering a Community Led Women's Space: Reflecting on Participation* The Women's Centre Programme, Thematic Summary: Issue, 3. www.cycj.org.uk

ⁱⁱ Teasdale, S., (2012) Negotiating Tensions: How Do Social Enterprises in the Homelessness Field Balance Social and Commercial Considerations. *Housing Studies* 27 (4): 514-32

ⁱⁱⁱ Mobile diaries are typically used with a small group of participants, purposively sampled, to capture their personally relevant insights, reflections on key issues, feelings or events which are further explored in follow up interviews. They allow for the generation of data that interviews or observations cannot achieve.

^{iv} A project diary is a written record of insights, recording how decisions are being made, experiences, significant activities, events or processes that occur during the life of a project.