

The Women's Centre Programme, Thematic Summary: Issue 5 | November 2019

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RE-FRAMING THE SPACE: FROM A COMMUNITY-LED WOMEN'S SPACE TO A WOMEN-LED COMMUNITY SPACE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is the fifth in a series of short thematic summaries in which we share what we have heard and learnt from the people that have taken part in our research into [The Robertson Trust's Women's Centre Programme](#). This thematic summary builds on our third thematic summary which reflected on both [processes of delivery and dynamics of participation in Heart and Soul](#), but is designed to capture the transition from Heart and Soul (as documented in Issue 3) to Heart and Soul Hub, and thus the revised approach and divergent aims, rather than the impacts and outcomes of the original model, as previously reported. In so doing, it provides an overview of the journey of Heart and Soul from its inception, to its transition to Heart and Soul Hub, noting the changes to the physical space, governance and approach, the dynamics of participation, and its contribution to the community.

HEADLINE FINDINGS

- Following deliberations between the host organisation, Centrestage and the Robertson Trust, Heart and Soul transitioned from a women's space to a women-led community space accessible to all, Heart and Soul Hub. The Hub provides a social space for people, with regular activities and access to support. The Hub hosts a number of external organisations who facilitate groups or run drop-ins offering their specialist support to members of the community.
- A 'core group' of women lead the development and delivery of the Hub. They find friendship and peer support through their participation in the Hub, which to them feels like home and provides a space and place for them to be themselves. Their vision for the Hub is a place where they can provide support to those groups in the community who are felt to be in need. They report feeling included and valued participants in the Hub's development and operation.
- Other people from the local community use the Hub to access support, attend activities, drop-ins and groups or simply use the space as a social area. The Hub is thought to address issues of social isolation and stigma within the wider community. However the role of participants beyond the core group in contributing to the development of the Hub, and for their more meaningful inclusion, beyond accessing support or activities, is currently unclear. This potentially creates narrow parameters on the contribution of the Hub to both impact on, and be experienced as a resource for, the community more broadly.
- Some unease was expressed by participants regarding both the desirability and practicality of balancing the needs and wants of local women for a safe and nurturing space for women, with the aspiration of wider community access to support and services of the host organisation.

INTRODUCTION

The Women's Centre Programme has been developed by The Robertson Trust 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.

From the inception, the concept involved 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 women's centres were 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 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 Robertson Trust support the development of two physical "women's spaces", 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. The Robertson Trust also provided support to one existing person-centred organisation to develop a women's space. 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, and the critical factors that increase the likelihood of success. Two further thematic summaries were published in 2018; our second thematic summary explored the learning from the [design and development of Kairos, a women's space in Johnstone](#), and our third thematic summary reflected on both [processes of delivery and dynamics of participation in Heart and Soul](#), Cumnock. In 2019, we produced a fourth thematic summary on the development of the women's space within the pre-existing community-led organisation, 'Lochaber Hope', in Fort William. This penultimate thematic summary is designed to capture the transition from *Heart and Soul* (as documented in Issue 3) to *Heart and Soul Hub*, and thus the revised approach and divergent aims, rather than the impacts and outcomes of the original model, as previously reported.

Heart and Soul Hub: The Journey So Far

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, representing its social enterprise element.

2018 Running the coffee shop alongside various programmed activities and events characterised the first half of 2018. In addition, Heart and Soul 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 was an important step to becoming 'of' the community, in terms of demonstrating value to the wider community. The initial Development Worker concluded her involvement with Heart & Soul in May 2018. Findings presented in the [third Thematic Summary](#) reflected fieldwork undertaken between October 2017-May 2018, both before and after the unanticipated departure of the Development Worker and informed by preceding research with Heart and Soul undertaken between May 2015 and February 2017.

2019 The original concept of a community-led women’s space has evolved into a community hub, led by Centrestage, which is open to all, but with a particular focus on engaging women, a core group of whom have a steering role in its delivery. Following a period of consultation with volunteers and the Robertson Trust, its revised focus is on providing support and guidance in the promotion of positive mental health and wellbeing, self-confidence and the fostering of healthy relationships. Following its refurbishment, the Heart & Soul hub was opened on Monday 1st April 2019.

Key Findings: The evolution to and dynamics of a women-led community space

The vision of Heart and Soul has changed over time from one of a space led by and for women in the community, to a community space open to all and steered by women. The conscious decision to expand the Centrestage mission to bring *'fun, food, folk'* to all living in Cumnock and the surrounding areas has meant that there have been a number of changes in the delivery, dynamics and approach to Heart and Soul, now known as Heart and Soul Hub (hereafter the Hub), altering who participates and how, and potentially how the Hub creates and contributes to a sense of, as well as the actual, community.

The space

The decision was made to disband the café, which was originally set up in Heart and Soul as a social enterprise, as it was viewed to be potentially excluding people who may have accessed Heart and Soul, but might feel intimidated or discouraged by the busy café setting or potential financial costs. Additionally, the work and effort of running and maintaining a café of quality to ensure footfall, and sustainability, was thought to detract from the capacity of staff and volunteers to undertake other supports and activities in keeping with the Heart and Soul ethos and approach. By removing tables and chairs and replacing them with coffee tables and couches, the premises has a brighter, open and more homely feel which is hoped to attract different members of the community and encourage them to use the space in different ways, including, for example, function hire. While a child-friendly space has been created in the adjoining room, the kitchen/ cooking facilities and private room are still accessible for dedicated activities.



The perceived change in atmosphere since the move to a hub was described by participants as more inviting, open and accommodating, in that it allowed people to use the space for as long or little as they like, and in ways which suited them.

“...We would come in and have our lunch and then do it [activity] then leave...the atmosphere is totally different now.”

Other examples of the diverse use of the space included a local man who regularly visits to read his morning paper, and another two older adult women who regularly meet up at the Hub with their grandchildren, allowing the children to play while they catch up. For these people, the Hub is less about accessing peer support, or participation in planned activities, than a community space they can spend time in.

Who engages with the Hub?

A ‘core group’ of approximately eight women remain at the centre of the activities offered at the Hub, both giving and receiving peer support from other women and staff at the Hub, and also volunteering their time and skills to contribute to its development and operation. For this group, the refurbishment of the physical space from café to Hub, and with that its activity, has provided an increased opportunity for them to share and contribute to the activities, running and development of the Hub.

“I think that we feel we’ve got a part to play here now”

Activities, shaped by the interests and wants of this group include: knitting, bread-making, and a choir; and future planned developments include a history group, camera club, and ‘spooky’ group, exploring the paranormal. During a recent period of staff absence, this core group have assumed increased roles and responsibilities within the Hub and, with additional support from Centrestage, this has included responsibility for the day to day running of the hub. Women from this core group reported to ‘*feel much more part of it, of the place*’, in part facilitated through weekly ‘catch-ups’ and online group chats with Hub staff, and this sense of transparency and support in turn has conveyed to them that they are valued contributors to and participants in the Hub.

“We have regular meetings with her to discuss fund-raising and all these sorts of things. We’re very much in the loop”

“I feel I’ve been given ownership of the place...and we’ve been given the confidence to do things in here now”

In an effort to reposition Heart and Soul’s identity as an open community hub space, engagement work has been undertaken by the hub staff with a number of agencies who are already working with people in the community. Liaising with other agencies has provided opportunities to build professional relationships, share what the Hub offers, and encourage referrals or signposting to the Hub. Stemming from this engagement, a range of organisations also use the Hub as a base to work from, a place to engage with the community or to signpost clients to for support. For example community police run an informal drop-in, as do the Department of Work and Pensions, local housing providers, and NHS staff teams on a weekly basis. Additionally, a recovery group use the premises to hold weekly peer support meetings. As the identity of the Hub as a community support developed, they were approached by local police to try and help support a group of young people engaging in antisocial behaviour in the

community by offering diversionary activities. There is ongoing work being undertaken with this group in partnership with school, police and other third sector agencies.

In addition to direct participation, there also appears to be a growing online community associated with the Hub, which shares information about the types of support and activities on offer. While its main purpose is to publicise opportunities, activities and support it appears to have the effect of breaking down initial barriers to physical participation. For example, during observational visits, we observed a number of local people dropping into the Hub to access food provisions, an extension of Centrestage's 'dignified food provision' initiatives, which are publicised through social media. Moreover, one woman, who has recently moved from England to the local area, is now engaging in activities at the Hub as a consequence of having discovered the Hub and developed connections with staff and volunteers online.

For all participants, the future possibilities for engaging others in the Hub was apprehended as an exciting opportunity. The core group were keen to involve groups of women, with a focus on including young women: girls, and those with children. The need for wider engagement with groups was identified as a way of both developing and sustaining the Hub in the future:

"I need to think about succession planning so that we've still got a core group of women that come in...planning to get the young folk in so that they're going to take ownership, they'll work with the girls and come up with great ideas"

Participants recognised that the development of new and the diversification of existing resources and opportunities available within the Hub, to encourage engagement across a wider demographic would require a different strategy of engagement with suggestions including a clothing exchange, or a pizza and games night.

While the repositioning of Heart and Soul as a community hub has potential to increase their reach and enhance participation, there are still challenges around inclusion. Exclusionary practices were evident, which have the potential to question, diminish and damage the underpinning ethos and aims of the Hub. For example, a woman who had attended Heart and Soul over a considerable period of time was, with the agreement of Centrestage, banned from attending the Hub due to conflict with members of the core group. Similarly, while the recovery group were encouraged to access and utilise the space within the Hub, there were strict conditions and parameters in relation to their engagement, for example their presentation, under a 'duty of care' to the other users of the hub. Specifically these examples highlight the need for further consideration of how, as the Hub develops, they negotiate and deal with conflict and to which members of the Hub, or community, they have a duty of care to, and by implication, who is excluded from that.

How does it contribute to community?

In widening access to the space, there was a perception that Heart and Soul Hub reduces isolation among those participating in it, which is prevalent in the largely rural and aging community, and is proactively addressing stigma in relation to vulnerable groups and enhancing social integration. 'Community Connectors' and other agencies were instrumental in signposting individuals to the Hub where people could utilise and occupy the space, access support from staff or external agencies, and socialise through participation in activities. Participants gave examples of how the Hub reduced isolation for individuals, provided peer support for others, and was developing a reputation as a safe space for all. For example, participants suggested that, for one older woman, who has learning support needs,

her regular engagement in the Hub imbued her day with purpose, disrupting the routine of her care, while developing her skills and affording her opportunities for social interaction.

The Hub was viewed as destigmatising groups of people who typically experience exclusion from and marginalisation in the wider community, outwith the Hub, through the relationships being formed within the Hub, for example between the core group and an NHS recovery group.

“These are people who we would probably even cross the street to stay out their road, but we get to know them”

“[recovery groups using the Hub] it’s vital, it does change the perception of this group of people”

However there was some indication that the approach to community engagement for the Hub was that of encouraging access rather than inclusion, where these groups and their members are equal participants in the hub; while people are welcome to access the space, and, while there, they will be accepted and treated with dignity and respect, participants made clear that there were conditions attached to, and a limit on their engagement with, or position within, the Hub in terms of their participation, potential and power to shape its development and delivery.

“But then we’ve got to be careful that we don’t bring in too much and the quality goes down because you are trying to do quantity”

“I’ll not say it’s a friendship, it’s a casual friendship. They chat and have a cuppa tea”

“I mean we’ve got the recovery groups in...they’re in the back room”

“So you have to have your boundaries in and as long as you tell them at the beginning what the boundaries are...”

Between the ‘Core group’ of women who attend there was a keen sense of peer support, friendship and comradery. Many had not known each other prior to attending the Hub, but had created strong bonds and friendships which grew out with the activities of the Hub based on shared interests, experiences and humour. The relationships formed were characterised by trust and acceptance, and participants expressed that they can open up to each other and access support with the knowledge it will remain confidential. Critically, they also felt that the Hub was a place and space of sanctuary where they could ‘be themselves’, leaving caring, work and other commitments, or identities as mother, wife, and grandmother and the associated pressures and strains behind them, and relax and unwind.

“it’s hard to have a place where you can just be and just be yourself...you know somewhere to be...just to come in and chill”

Participants repeatedly referred to the Hub in the context of a ‘home’ and the relationships formed as that of a family.

“...come in and be a part of a kind of family”

“So this place is basically my home”

To some extent, this conceptualisation was reflected in the nature of the relationships the core group developed towards those community members outwith the core group who access the Hub. The core group tended to view the Hub as a place for other community members to use and a space wherein they might access support, notably from the core group, rather than encouraging them to share their own strengths, ideas and aspirations, or shape the direction of development for the Hub.

“It’s making us feel we can do something, give something back to the community”

Reflecting something of an emergence of matriarchal tendencies across the core group, their vision for increased engagement was from groups of people ‘who weren’t coping’ or who needed support, which the core group could provide. For example their discussions around their aspirations to engage younger women and girls was for the purposes of providing support, rather than seeking to coproduce with a more diverse and representative demographic of the community.

“The young ones, like young mums who need help, they aren’t coping or people that need help with the Brew...”

“I don’t think there should be an age limit [on accessing the hub]...cos there must be some of these girls that would need help...”

This help and assistance which was proposed for young girls included help with homework or make-overs or upholstery. For one member of the community who accesses the Hub via the recovery support group, the women expressed how, over time, they have been able to support him to manage his personal hygiene which they suggest has had a positive impact on other relationships in his life, but ultimately, they concluded that *“he needs a mammy”*. While the maternal principle typically denotes nurturing and caring *for*, and concepts of ‘family’ a bond or connection, both can feel inclusive to those who are part of it, but can also feel exclusionary for those who are not and may result in the protectionist tendencies of the core group to arise.

Community space for or steered by women?

Following on from the notion of matriarchy, and the protective tendencies towards the Hub, participants comprising the core group and staff expressed some concerns about the protection of the women’s space and its underpinning ethos as the Hub grows to include the wider community. Participants expressed some discord between desires and vision for the Hub between the Hub staff and participants, and the lead organisation.

“Centrestage has got this all-inclusive thing...but we can’t lose sight of the fact that this place, the ethos is for the women of Cumnock, their health and wellbeing.”

“maybe we’ve moved on from the original concept, its grew and so it should do...but they have to still bear in mind what the ethos of this place is and who we’re here originally and always to help is the women of Cumnock and the surrounding areas...”

“...that is where our heart lies, is with the ladies”

There is the perception that the decision to move from a women's space to a community space was not fully explored with the core group of women, that their understanding and ownership of this shift needs more development, and will require ongoing support. For the core group, the focus, ethos and vision of Heart and Soul Hub should remain about supporting the specific needs of women, within a wider community context. Concerns were raised about the delivery of both of these visions within the same space, and women questioned whether a safe space for potentially vulnerable women could be provided in a premises which is occupied by groups of vulnerable men.

Summary of Key Learning

- In removing the café, the Hub is accessible to a diverse range of participants who wish to use the calm, open environment in a range of ways: a safe, quiet space; somewhere to socialise; a place to run groups or drop-ins. The café environment may have been a barrier for some.
- A 'core group' of women lead the development of the Hub in terms of design and developing the ethos and to some extent the approach. For them, the Hub provides peer support and social opportunities, activities based on their interests, and an opportunity to support those who may be in need.
- The Hub has increased the range of people accessing the space and support through a number of agency drops-ins, food provision and hosting groups. There is less evidence to show how meaningful their engagement is with the Hub more broadly in keeping with the ethos of Heart and Soul Hub; to what extent they use the Hub as a place to access support; and to what extent the vision is for their inclusion to extent to the development and delivery of the Hub.

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

Appendix: A note on methods

The evaluation takes a participatory action-research approach, using mixed methods. The evaluators have been charting the journey and development of Heart and Soul Hub over a number of years. This thematic summary was informed by the following methods:

- Two observational study visits to observe key planned activities designed to engage women or spend time in the centre to observe interactions, activities and dynamics.
- A focus group was undertaken with Heart and Soul Hub participants (4) to explore the changing nature of delivery of the women's space and the concept of community in this development. Due to staffing issues it was only possible to undertake interviews with one staff member.