



WANDSWORTH LINK

PRELIMINARY REPORT ON ENTER AND VIEW VISITS TO WANDSWORTH FAMILY ACTION -10 & 20 OCT 2011

Introduction

As part of the LINK's announced study of community mental health services in Wandsworth we decided to focus this part of our study on changes in the provision of day/resource centres. Following discussion with Wandsworth Borough Council Department of Adult Social Services (DASS) and with the kind co-operation of the management, staff and members of Wandsworth Family Action we carried out an Enter and View visit to the Family Action hub at 1, Bedford Hill SW12 on the afternoon of Monday 10 October 2011 and a subsequent visit to Family Action Service User Network activities at the Wilditch Centre, Culvert St SW11 on the morning of Thursday 20 October. The Enter and View team members involved in the first visit were Martin Haddon, Gerry Horner and Juliet Matthews; owing to a combination of circumstances, some unforeseen, Gerry Horner carried out the second visit on his own. This report represents the team's preliminary findings from these visits. There will be a number of issues to which we will return in a subsequent report on the overall day/resource centre arrangements, after we have completed further visits and discussions.

Overall impressions

Following restructuring of its service Wandsworth Family Action is currently commissioned by DASS to provide a day resource/activity service for people with mental health problems on a hub and spoke model. The service is

assigned to cover the North East and South East sectors of the Borough. The Bedford Hill hub is centrally located and easy to reach by public transport. The building, which is tall (basement, ground and 3 upper floors) and narrow (only one sizeable room on each level), cannot in our view be described as ideal for the purpose. In particular we felt it could be offputting for elderly people or others with restricted mobility. It has however served its purpose as a drop-in and activity centre for a number of years and clearly attracts the loyalty of many of its users. Bearing in mind the disruption and anxiety which change can cause we did not feel it would be right to make any recommendation at this point but we believe that the issue of location may need to be reviewed at some stage in the future.

The facilities available at 1, Bedford Hill seemed at first sight adequate within the clear limitations of the space available: a catering kitchen big enough to accommodate half a dozen trainees, a cafe with service area and seating space for up to about 16 – 18 users, two group rooms capable of seating perhaps a dozen, of which one is equipped for basic artwork activity, one general purpose office with networked computer terminals for flexible staff use and one dedicated smallish admin office, plus one or two other smaller rooms. We are not qualified to judge the range and quality of equipment and fittings. The state of repair and general decoration seemed good although there were some suggestions that expenditure other than on strictly necessary items has been restricted in recent times, perhaps because of uncertainty about the future.

The Wilditch Centre gives a bleak and rather unwelcoming impression, at least to a first-time visitor. Family Action rent a large room on the first floor for one morning a week for a Service User Network meeting and an activity group, currently Music Appreciation. There appear to be no refreshment facilities. We were told that the possibility of alternative accommodation in the Battersea area is being explored. We were informed about Family Action activities at other community venues in the Eastern half of the Borough, including the Patmore Centre, the Katherine Low Settlement and Balham Leisure Centre but we did not visit these.

The activities at the Bedford Hill centre and at the other community venues seem, from what we have seen and been told, to consist mainly of:

- individual keywork sessions including the review of individual service plans and Recovery Star (holistic self-assessment) reviews;
- educational workshops of a broadly psychosocial or health-related character , such as on the use of Recovery Star, managing mental health, practical living skills, women's issues and physical health and wellbeing;
- vocational workshops and volunteering programme, through which service users are given opportunities to acquire work-related skills and experience, including running the cafe at 1, Bedford Hill and contributing to the administrative support of the service;
- groups and activities organised and run through the service user network (ie not involving staff participation), such as art, drama, current affairs and music appreciation; there are also regular service user outings and meetings of a more informal character;
- the drop-in cafe at 1, Bedford Hill at which meals are served throughout the day;
- regular meetings to discuss "business" or individual users' news;
- counselling: 8 trainee counsellors supervised by a qualified counselling supervisor;
- mentoring: there is a team of 12 volunteer mentors to support individual service users to achieve their Recovery goals;
- a system of service user feedback, involving service user representatives' "surgeries" and a comments/suggestions/complaints box which is reviewed with the service user reps. We were told that arrangements were now in place for regular user satisfaction surveys involving the service user reps.

We did not see enough of these activities to judge their quality nor are we qualified to do so. But we were impressed by the enthusiasm and dedication of the staff members and volunteers (mainly former service users) whom we

saw, some of whom have been working at Family Action for a number of years. There was anecdotal evidence of real results achieved in helping people overcome barriers of low motivation and self-confidence resulting from mental health problems.

At 1, Bedford Hill we attended a regular “business” meeting of service users and staff. The proceedings and discussion on this occasion were perhaps untypical, partly as a result of our presence and partly because the main item of business was a farewell to two ex-service user staff members who were leaving at the end of their one-year contracts. A newly appointed service user representative was introduced. One of the leading volunteers made an announcement about the groups he ran. The participation by the 15 or so service users present was rather muted, perhaps as a result of our presence, but there was an atmosphere of mutual respect and tolerance. The meeting at Wilditch Centre, although described as Service User Network meeting was largely led by a staff member and mainly consisted of information on new activities being introduced. Again the presence of a LINK visitor may have acted to reduce participation by the 6 service users who attended.

Interviews with service users

At both 1, Bedford Hill and the Wilditch Centre we invited service users who were willing to do so to meet individually with one or more of us to discuss their experience of Family Action on the basis of some questions which we had prepared. We were able to interview 5 users at 1, Bedford Hill (between a quarter and a third of those who were attending that afternoon) and 4 out of the 6 attendees at the Wilditch Centre. We assured our interviewees that we would not be identifying them individually in our report and what follows is inevitably only a brief summary of what we heard.

Five of our interviewees were male and four female. Two-thirds were from Black or Minority Ethnic communities. Their ages seemed to range from young adulthood to pensionable age.

Four of the users we interviewed had been coming to Family Action for one or two years, while the majority seemed to have been coming for longer, in one case about 12 years. While a third or more of our interviewees were clearly making progress in recovery and developing interests and activities outside Family Action, all of those we spoke to seemed to feel the need for the continuing support of the service for the foreseeable future. Nearly all felt under no pressure to “move on” in the sense of giving up attendance at the centre.

Most of what our interviewees had to tell us about the service was positive. Those who attended the hub, the majority, found its location convenient. One of our interviewees at the Wilditch Centre found Bedford Hill too far to travel regularly. All appreciated being offered something to do and the opportunity to meet and be with people, things which can be difficult for people with mental health problems. Those who did voluntary work at the hub particularly liked doing so and some had hopes it would help them in due course get back into the world of paid work. One interviewee was in part-time paid work elsewhere but valued coming to the centre regularly to do voluntary admin work and meet other service users.

Some but not all of our interviewees currently participated in Family Action’s educational and other activities, including those organised through the Service User Network, and enjoyed them. One interviewee suggested that the range of activities had reduced immediately following the restructuring of the service at the beginning of the financial year and had not completely returned to the former level. We heard some suggestions for additions to the programme, such as yoga and the improvement of IT skills.

It is perhaps noteworthy that few of our interviewees had much to say about changes in the service as a result of restructuring, although a number of those interviewed at the Wilditch Centre had previously attended Edward Wilson House and regretted its closure at the end of last financial year, finding the present arrangements less satisfactory in one way or another.

Our interviewees mostly got on well with staff. Perhaps understandably, given its highly personal nature, few had much to say about their experience of

keyworking and some tended to be rather vague about the use of the Recovery Star assessment and goal setting tool: indeed one interviewee was apparently not aware of having a key worker at the centre. A few of our interviewees specifically mentioned finding their keyworker and the assessment process helpful. One was more critical of the key worker who was perceived as having initially offered more than they were able to deliver in terms of concrete support and also as pushing the service user into situations for which they were not ready.

One interviewee found the overall atmosphere of the centre and its staff rather too focussed on the positive: raising problems was not encouraged. Although this service user was clearly deriving benefit from the service and making progress towards recovery goals, this comment strikes us as a significant one that needs to be given consideration: we believe it is important for a service of this kind to make it safe for its users to acknowledge and express the full range of their views and feelings whether positive or negative, provided only that other users are not disturbed;

Most of our interviewees found the service responsive to their views and suggestions and encouraging of participation.

A number of our interviewees were apparently unaware or aware only to a limited extent of the funding arrangements which allow their attendance at Family Action and of the changes which these arrangements have recently been going through. We have some concern that this could leave them vulnerable to the possibly unforeseen impact of future changes.

Conclusions

We were impressed with the evident good work being done at Wandsworth Family Action by a dedicated, skilled and enthusiastic team of staff and volunteers to support a vulnerable group of people and to help them towards overcoming the many obstacles they face to a more active and socially connected way of life. A number of issues arise for us, some of which have been touched on above and some of which we intend to consider further in our continuing study:

- we think that to some extent the 1, Bedford Hill hub, while being as conveniently located as any one centre is likely to be, works in spite of rather than because of the nature of the building and may be off-putting to some groups of potential users. But we make no recommendation at this stage;
- we were told that the numbers of service users being supported by Family Action are falling significantly short (at this stage halfway through the financial year) of the expected numbers on which the current commission is based. We are not clear of the reasons for this which may need to be looked at in a wider context. We propose to consider this issue further;
- we found that service users generally felt listened to and encouraged to participate in the practical running of the service, particularly at 1, Bedford Hill; we were told about the service user feedback arrangements, including the role of the two service user representatives and the introduction of user satisfaction surveys. We welcome the latter development and hope it will lead to a more systematic and effective dialogue with service users about the range and quality of the services provided;
- we believe that the comment above about allowing the expression of negative as well as positive views and feelings needs to be considered;
- we believe that the suggestions we heard for additional activities, in particular yoga and the improvement of service users' IT skills, are worthy of consideration;
- we are very conscious that the current arrangements at Family Action reflect a wider process of change over recent years towards a more explicitly Recovery-based and outcome-focussed service model, including the adoption of the hub and spoke pattern of service delivery. At the same time there have been budget reductions and major changes in funding arrangements. This wider process of change clearly goes beyond the scope of this report but we intend to come back to it and draw out some issues for future consideration in a subsequent report after making further visits and enquiries.

Martin Haddon

Gerry Horner

Juliet Matthews

22 November 2011