



The Blossom Project:

A Way Out

Since 2016, **A Way Out** has been funded by The National Lottery Community Fund as part of their Women and Girls Initiative to deliver the **Blossom Project**. Blossom works with, and supports, young women who are at risk of being sexually exploited and who are facing a range of vulnerabilities. Its aim is to empower and advocate for young women and support them to build emotional resilience, make positive life choices, and realise their aspirations.

Established in 2002 and based in Stockton-on-Tees, A Way Out is an outreach and prevention charity which aims to engage, empower, and equip vulnerable and excluded women, families, and young people to find A Way Out of life-limiting and life-controlling situations such as poverty, addiction, abuse, harm, and exploitation.

A trauma-informed, asset-based, and person-led approach is embedded in the roots of the charity and lays at the heart of its approach to its services, which range from one-to-one support, group work, and peer support as well as other programmes, for example leadership and social action projects.

Over its four years of funding, Blossom has supported 87 young women and has also expanded its service, enabling them to meet changing local need.



What is Blossom?

The Blossom Project is an outreach, engagement and targeted support service working with young women aged between 13 and 25 facing severe and multiple disadvantages, complex needs or vulnerabilities and who are identified as at risk of being sexually exploited.

The support offered is wide ranging, from drop-ins to one-to-one support, peer support and group work – covering topics around sexual health, mental health, well-being, empowerment, practical and life skills – and therapeutic counselling. All these activities are focussed on working with girls and young women to strengthen their capabilities, enhance their lifestyles, and raise their long-term aspirations, with the aim of preventing them from being vulnerable to exploitation and abuse and progressing into survival sex work.

In keeping with the ethos of A Way Out, the girls and young women are at the centre of, and integral to, Blossom's work. The support is person-centred, with girls and young women themselves identifying what matters to them and what they want to work on. This is achieved through an ongoing process of co-production and together developing, planning, and reviewing their own support goals as well as peer sessions or group work. Being at the heart of the service is key for the girls and young women: they feel seen and listened to, which they feel is one of the most important measures of project success.

Blossom's work is underpinned by an explicit focus on: 'relationship development' between the service – that provides a 'trusted adult' figure through the support worker – and the women; providing a safe space; and offering unconditional support, manifested through the 'open-ended' nature of provision i.e. young women can (re) engage with Blossom for as long as they need to within the age range.

These characteristics of the service played a particularly important function during COVID-19 and the resulting worsening of young women's existing conditions, for example increased depression, anxiety, loneliness, stress, and mental health issues including self-harm and suicide. Shifting rapidly to digital technology, Blossom's response emphasised consistency of service and maintaining relationships with young women, thereby continuing to prioritise the protective factors of the 'trusted adult' figure and unconditional support, which remained a priority throughout.

Blossom also expanded in response to changing local needs. It developed from a support service for women aged 16 to 24 into a service that supports young women from the age of 13 to 25 and that contains several different strands. For example, its Additional Needs Project Worker now provides specialist support for young women with learning disabilities or difficulties; the team also now includes a Transition Worker to support young women aged 16 to 18 who have experienced sexual abuse and/or sexual exploitation at any point in their life by being the 'bridge' between child and adult services, allowing girls and young women to have a safe space to talk freely about previous abuse and to access therapeutic interventions. As the team has developed and expanded, they currently have a collective caseload of approximately 60 girls and young women at any one time accessing one-to-one support.

Blossom is also well linked into public and voluntary sector organisations and networks. It continues to work closely with external partners, for example accepting referrals from a variety of agencies across Teesside such as social care, education providers, mental health agencies (statutory and voluntary), police, housing, and youth services.

"The young women have led on group session topics such as baking, beat boxing, rapping, friendship, team building games, periods, mental health and self-esteem. The impact of this on the young women is increased resilience, feeling empowered and social support."

Why is it needed?

In the region, the figures for teenage pregnancy are higher than the national average, there is a high population of looked after children and high incidences of sexual exploitation. Blossom's final evaluation report (2020-2021) for example, found that in 2018/19 there were 1872 children looked after in the Tees Valley, an 8% increase from the previous year. This is before taking into consideration the impact of COVID-19, which is suspected to have led to further increases in children at risk.

The Hartlepool and Stockton-on-Tees Safeguarding Children Partnership's Annual Report (2020-21) highlights that in Stockton-on-Tees, there are 579 children and young people who are looked after, and 14 children and young people identified as being at risk of Child Sexual Exploitation.

In addition, the latest available data from End Child Poverty (May 2021) for Stockton-on-Tees shows that 35.3% of children are living in poverty compared to an average of 37% in the North-East and 31% nationally. Research has continued to show that children who live in poverty are at greater risk of facing additional traumatic experiences or being exposed to a range of risks that can have a serious impact on their mental health and life chances. With deprivation levels higher than the national average for children already living in poverty, these challenges are likely to increase, particularly given the impact of COVID-19 on families.

Blossom is, therefore, a unique and much needed service in the Tees Valley. Many young women engaged with Blossom have lived tough lives: many have mental health issues, have experienced abuse, domestic or sexual violence, family breakdown, homelessness. Unsurprisingly, they are often struggling with the impacts of trauma and have little confidence or self-worth. Because of their life experiences, they often have not had the opportunity to develop or strengthen capabilities – for example to be emotionally stable, to be healthy, to make informed decisions – that enable people to function, take control of their lives, and be who they want to be. But with the right support, young women can use their strengths to overcome these challenges. And this is what Blossom provides. Through ongoing support, it works to strengthen young women's capabilities so that they can raise their aspirations and realise their potential.

Blossom continuously adapts its service to meet changing local needs of young women and identified gaps in services. Lowering referral criteria to include young women from the age of 13 (from 16) was in response to rising need and increasing enquiries from schools and children's social care. This resulted in additions to Blossom's activities, which now include support for family members, and projects that support young people not in education, employment, or training (NEET). Working closely with girls and young women highlighted a gap in local service provision in terms of support for young women with additional needs who are identified as more at risk of abuse and exploitation. Blossom now provides this specialist support. The Transition Worker was an expansion following the identification of a gap in service provision when transitioning from childhood to adulthood, a time in which young people can experience a sudden loss of support available to them.

This flexibility and responsiveness to the local changing needs of young women and subsequent development of a suite of services, increases the offer and choice available and enables Blossom to support more people and meet local demand.

What difference does it make?

An external evaluation carried out over the final two years of the project, and co-produced with young women accessing Blossom's services, showed the following impacts:

Young women are more resilient

Blossom impacts positively on the development of a range of capabilities that support people to function and take control of their lives, with young women identifying the most important ones for them: to be confident, to be safe, to be physically and emotionally healthy, to be able to make and maintain relationships and to be knowledgeable.

"I really appreciate being able to come here and talk about my problems. Even if I talk about the same thing over and over again, you never get sick of me like my friends and family do. You just continue to listen and provide support for as long as it takes."

"I feel like other professionals and family are too quick to tell me I shouldn't be feeling suicidal. They seem to start panicking and trying to fix the problem whereas you just let me talk and don't seem scared by how I'm feeling. [At Blossom] I feel really safe."

Key to achieving this is the long-term support that Blossom provides to young women, coupled with a focus on developing a trusting and secure relationship with them, which are crucial to strengthen capabilities that have become damaged or are undeveloped.

Young women feel supported through transition-related issues

By not having a cut-off point in their service, Blossom helps bridge the gap between children's and adult services. The transition from child to adult services, which occurs at 18 years old, is a challenging time for the young women that Blossom work with. They experience a change of professionals involved in their care, which can be compounded by confusion, uncertainty, lack of independent living skills, or unclear expectations of how they should cope in the adult world. Criteria also changes, with a focus on disability rather than vulnerability. This reduces the support available for some of Blossom's young women when they reach 18 years old, even if they are still affected by trauma that occurred in their lives at a younger age.

For certain service users, A Way Out is the only source of support.

"I received support from CAMHS¹ when I was 17 and was closed to them a few months before I turned 18 without any warning. I was told that I would be transitioned to adult mental health services, but this didn't happen. I didn't even know that my last appointment with CAMHS would be my last. I felt like I'd been completely dropped and abandoned which really affected me. I felt like nobody was listening to the fact that I still felt suicidal and the fact that just because I was almost legally an adult, I still felt very much like a child. Luckily, I was referred into Blossom who have continued to support me into adulthood. I don't want to think about where I would be without their support."

"I stand up for myself so much more now and as time goes on, with your support, I'm feeling more and more comfortable to assert myself and put myself first."

Young women trust Blossom, which empowers them to make informed choices about their future

Through Blossom, young women build positive, trusting relationships not only with one another but with staff and volunteers too who act as 'trusted adults'. A key strength of the project is that young women greatly value this function of 'trusted adult' as it provides them with reassurance, confidence, and self-esteem they need in order to enhance their lifestyles and raise their long-term aspirations.

Why should you support it?

It created a service for young women and girls of all ages that fills a gap

Blossom provides support for girls and young women of different age groups. Referring organisations can now select which Blossom service they require: 13 to 16; 16 to 24; support with additional needs; transition from child to adult services. This service segmentation means support is there where previously there was none, and it has a positive impact on the girls and young women Blossom work with because it has increased the opportunities and choices open to them. Employment support is also now encompassed within the overall service offer for anyone who needs it.

¹ Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

It plays an important preventative role

Young women have the option to (re) engage in Blossom – for example in group/peer support or one-to-one sessions – if and when they feel vulnerable again and for as long as they need to.

This characteristic of long-term support provision with no cut-offs or sanctions in service access enables Blossom to play a strong prevention role. Even a low level of input can prevent relapses into poor mental health or stop a crisis from escalating, reducing the need for social care or mental health support from statutory services.

“How Blossom has made such a difference in my life and how I find it comforting to know that when I need to reach out and ask for support I can.”

“Blossom gave me brilliant support and if you need anything, they will try their hardest to help you in any which way they can.”

Blossom is led by young women, which makes them feel empowered and improves local delivery

Blossom believes in young women and their voices are at the heart of the project and its regular evaluation. This not only supports young women to feel empowered and motivated, but ensures services are continuously improved, shaped around their needs and, therefore, relevant.


At Blossom, the young women are also periodically involved in contributing to local partnership consultations where their opinions and experiences are shared to enhance local service delivery. *This strengthens their entitlements, particularly to the political process and to voice.*


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