

Sisters are doing it for themselves:

The *Supporting Sisters* programme at Aspire Women's Centre

Aspire Women's Centre is all about aspiration. Since 2012, women in Chester-le-Street and the surrounding area have been able to access learning and personal development opportunities at Aspire. Aspire's diverse range of courses, training and groups reflect a holistic approach, supporting women to develop confidence alongside skills and qualifications. Aspire women learn to recognise their strengths and to overcome barriers to learning and thriving; they gain the courage to try new things, set themselves challenges, reflect on their progress and value their achievements.

Aspire was established and is sustained by women in the community. As a result, its services reflect not only what local women want and need, but also what they themselves have to offer. Aspire grows its own volunteers and is powered by those volunteers: many women begin taking courses and end up as group leaders and tutors. It is not merely 'co-produced' with women who have lived experience of disadvantage: it is designed, delivered, maintained and evaluated by them.

What is Supporting Sisters?

Supporting Sisters trains volunteers to become peer mentors and befrienders to women who want to access Aspire's groups and courses but would struggle to do so without additional support. It enables the most disadvantaged women to engage in the learning programme, stay well and get more from their lives. Since 2016 it has been funded by The National Lottery Community Fund as part of their Women and Girls Initiative. Supporting Sisters also provides a creche facility to enable women with young children to participate.

Why is it needed?

County Durham is the most deprived part of the North-East. Many people are living on a low income, and there are high rates of unemployment. The number of people on incapacity benefit, disability living allowance, pension credits and income support is well above the national average.

Poverty and social exclusion contribute to anxiety, social anxiety and depression. Many Aspire women live tough lives: they have little money, often have caring responsibilities, and many have long term mental and physical health issues. Some have experienced multiple disadvantages across their whole lives: abuse or neglect as children, negative school experiences, being in care, and domestic or sexual violence as adults. Not surprisingly, they are often struggling with the impacts of trauma, have little confidence or self-worth, and have had few opportunities to raise their aspirations. But Aspire women are also strong and, with the right support, can use their strengths to overcome the barriers to their learning and personal development. Aspire provides this support. It recognises that many women can't just go straight onto a structured course: they need to start gradually, to build their confidence and address any challenges in their lives. And once they're into training, the need for support doesn't stop. The integrated learning and wellbeing services at Aspire provide ongoing support to enable women to 'stay the course' and realise their potential.

What difference does it make?

***Supporting Sisters* reduces isolation and increases personal support**

Trained volunteers provide a confidential befriending and listening service that provides one-to-one support. This can be particularly important for women who are housebound or who find group situations difficult, and it provides a supportive, personalised pathway into other activities. For many women, *Supporting Sisters* leads to relationships which reduce long-term dependence on health and social care services and helps them develop the kind of peer, family and community support that will enable them to continue to grow and thrive.

"I never had a sense of community. I never felt that I fitted in, I didn't know who I was. But with Aspire, I have an identity. I know who I am. It's given me that identity. I know who I am now."

***Supporting Sisters* helps women to survive the impact of domestic abuse**

Women often live with physical, sexual, emotional and economic abuse for many years. Even when they achieve safety and independence, the trauma often continues to impact their lives. This understanding is integrated into the work of Aspire as a whole. Awareness raising events and themed drop-ins provide an informal but supported space for women to share experiences, find solidarity and challenge myths. Domestic Abuse Champions training is provided to all volunteers across the programme and posters around the centre inform women that they can speak to any of the *Supporting Sisters* volunteers in this capacity.

***Supporting Sisters* encourages women to look after themselves**

Women can face both financial and psychological barriers to accessing mainstream health and wellbeing services. So, *Supporting Sisters* encourages women to focus on their mental and physical wellbeing by providing a Wellness Service that promotes self-care and relaxation. Massage, podiatry, complementary therapies and general health "MOT"s are delivered by qualified practitioners and healthcare professionals and are free-of-charge.

"I didn't know what self-care was until I started coming [to Aspire]"

"The women here get full support to understand the process of setting up and managing their accounts and also have the relationship and trust with Aspire to know they and their savings are safe here."

***Supporting Sisters* helps women living with poverty keep their heads above water**

Debt, arrears and juggling limited finances are huge sources of anxiety for many women at Aspire. For that reason, the Centre became a North East First Credit Union collection point. *Supporting Sisters* volunteers have undertaken training to support other women to deal with their finances by opening savings accounts, switching suppliers, avoiding 'loan sharks' and dealing with debt.

***Supporting Sisters* bridges the gap between women's confidence and their aspirations**

Low self-esteem significantly impacts mental health and wellbeing. Women who lack a sense of self-worth may struggle to maintain healthy relationships, make positive changes in their lives and achieve their goals. *Supporting Sisters* recognises women's potential even when they can't see it themselves, helping women to identify their own strengths and gain the confidence to challenge themselves and try new things. Encouragement, praise and validation for their achievements help Aspire women learn to value themselves.

"Aspire has given me confidence, self-esteem, belief in myself. It's made me feel as though I am worth it: I am worth the space on this earth. Because that's how I felt, as though I was nothing. And Aspire teaches you that you're not nothing. Like, everyone has good qualities. That made me value myself."

***Supporting Sisters* helps women help other women**

Supporting Sisters provides a well-structured route for women who come to Aspire for their own support to go on to support other women. Central to *Supporting Sisters* is the volunteer training programme, which equips women to take on roles as peer mentors, group facilitators, befrienders and active listeners and to work in ways that are trauma-informed, empowering and cultivate a sense of community and solidarity among women. Volunteers are supported by regular reflective supervision and self-development opportunities.

"To be a Supporting Sister volunteer, you feel like part of a family. I wouldn't even say group because that doesn't do it justice, it's a family. You feel part of this... And you're all there, helping each other."

Why should you support it?

It's based on good evidence

Aspire takes evidence seriously. Its services draw on research and learning about effective interventions and ways of working with women. *Supporting Sisters* is evaluated using well-validated tools and attention is paid to assessing outcomes and distance travelled by women themselves as well as feedback from external stakeholders. Women are enthusiastic about being involved in the evaluation process. This reflects their investment in the Centre and enables *Supporting Sisters* to gather data that demonstrates the project's impact.

It gets results and saves money

Poor mental health impacts on physical health, employment, productivity and demand for social care and health services. Mental health problems represent the largest single cause of disability in the UK. The cost to the economy is estimated at over £100 billion a year – roughly the cost of the entire NHS.¹ Every GP appointment costs approximately £30.² The cost per day of inpatient mental health treatment is around £400.³ The annual cost of treatment for depression is likely to be well over £2,000.⁴

Over 90% of women attending Aspire weekly drop-ins report increased confidence, better mental health and wider social networks as a result. 75% report improvements in their physical health. These improvements reduce the need for health services and save money in the long-term.

¹ NHS England (2016) The Five Year Forward View for Mental Health: A report from the independent Mental Health Taskforce. McCrone P, Dhanasiri S, Patel A et al. (2008). Paying the price: the cost of mental health care in England to 2026. London: King's Fund.

² www.england.nhs.uk/2019/01/missed-gp-appointments-costing-nhs-millions

³ www.cchr.org.uk/cost-detained-psychiatric-ward-treated

⁴ www.kingsfund.org.uk/sites/default/files/Chapter%204.pdf

It's needed in the North-East today more than ever

The impact of the pandemic on mental wellbeing, loneliness and employment have been greater in the North-East than elsewhere in England.⁵ During the first lockdown in 2020 almost a quarter of the North East workforce were furloughed and 43,000 more people were on Universal Credit.⁶

Covid-19 has brought new challenges to everyone, but to none more than those who are disadvantaged, poor and female. *Supporting Sisters* has adapted quickly to new ways of working to support women to manage isolation, mental health crises, bereavement and increases in domestic abuse. They provide regular on-line groups for older women, an informal drop-in and a goal-orientated group focussed on resilience, mental health support and self-care.

And women trust it and love it

The feedback from women involved in *Supporting Sisters* says it all:

"Since volunteering at Aspire my life has improved greatly. I have gained new skills, qualifications, self confidence and experience. The Centre has given me the tools to develop as a person... [and] I am very proud to be a Supporting Sister."

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¹ www.manchester.ac.uk/discover/news/covid-19-pandemic-report-reveals-massive-hit-to-the-north-of-englands-health-and-economy

² www.northeastlep.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/economic-response-summary-report-final-1.pdf

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