

Next Steps Evaluation Report – Executive Summary

Key findings

The Next Steps programme has supported 644 women. Of those, 298 set out on the wilderness journey in phase 2, with 256 successfully completing and progressing into phase 3 of the programme. More than half of all women who completed the wilderness journey went on to achieve at least one 'positive destination' (education, employment, training or volunteering). Women who took part in all three phases of the programme showed an increase across a range of core life skills. Two thirds of women showed improvements in relation to stability and reduced likelihood of reoffending, and 8 out of 10 showed increased employability skills and self-confidence.

The Next Steps programme is seen by referring agencies and national stakeholders as absolutely complementing other provision for women in the criminal justice system; in particular in providing an essential personal development aspect to other provision which generally focuses on immediate practical support e.g. stable accommodation.

Stakeholders note the unique value of the Next Steps programme, in particular the residential wilderness aspects of it. They are clear that there would be a gap in provision if the programme did not exist, with no alternative provision. Stakeholders also stress that the availability of funded places across Scotland is very important, with referrers being unable to pay for their clients to undertake the programme.

The programme

Venture Trust aims to support people who, because of their life experiences, have become marginalised and vulnerable, and are experiencing chaotic and complex lifestyles. It aims to do this by supporting them to recognise what they need to change, and then to develop the confidence, motivation and life skills that they need to make those changes.

The Next Steps programme is targeted to women of all ages from any area in Scotland who:

- have a history of offending (or reoffending)
- are subject to community disposals (e.g. Community Payback Orders, Restriction of Liberty Orders, Drug Treatment & Testing Orders)
- are released into the community following custodial sentences
- are at risk of offending and referred from other programmes e.g. those struggling to engage with drug/alcohol support services.

The programme aims to achieve its goals by helping participants to:

- sustain and increase their self-confidence
- increase their employability
- improve relationships with those around them
- move towards or access employment, education, training and volunteering opportunities.

It is delivered in 3 phases:

1. Assessment and preparation
2. Intensive personal development in a wilderness environment
3. Community links – flexible, responsive and individually-tailored support to participants back in their home communities

In addition, Venture Trust has offered two additional programme components to selected participants:

- Women in Focus – a photography-based initiative supporting women to document their lives
- Peer Mentoring – giving participants the chance to offer peer support.

The evaluation

This evaluation was designed to explore the programme's impact on the personal and social development needs of the participants, and to what degree the project outcomes have been achieved.

The evaluation methods were designed to elicit the evidence detailed in the evaluation framework, and included:

- a review of existing relevant literature
- analysis of existing Venture Trust data
- baseline stakeholder survey (2015)
- final stakeholder survey (2017)
- stakeholder interviews (nationally strategic, locally strategic, referrers)
- Next Steps participant interviews and focus groups (76 women engaged over 3 years).

The participants

The nature of the target client group creates significant challenges in reaching potential participants. Of the women referred to the programme:

- 78% were offenders/had a criminal record
- 96% were not in employment
- 76% had mental health issues
- 80% had alcohol/substance abuse issues
- 28% had physical health issues
- 63% had five or more presenting issues.

Strategic stakeholders and referrers welcomed how Venture Trust staff had addressed the challenges in reaching potential participants by developing effective relationships with relevant local staff. Key success factors are having the Venture Trust Outreach Worker:

- regularly (based) in local offices
- attend relevant team meetings
- visible to both staff and potential clients in order to build rapport and trust.

Experiences of phase 1

Interviews with referrers described how Venture Trust Outreach Workers undertake a wide variety of activities during phase 1, focused on developing women's 'readiness' for phase 2: the wilderness journey. Both referrers and Venture Trust staff emphasise the importance of ensuring women's 'readiness' for the wilderness journey. Key 'readiness' criteria cited are:

- timing – ensuring the woman is ready to go on the journey
- stability – women's ability to attend regular appointments/meetings is seen as a readiness indication
- keenness – wanting to go on the wilderness journey.

"The main criterion is that they want to go, they are enthusiastic. If they really want to go, then we can overcome barriers." [Stakeholder]

In order to actually start the wilderness journey women had to overcome challenges such as:

- managing childcare/family/domestic responsibilities
"I was due to go away [on the journey] before, but the time wasn't right – my [family] responsibilities. It's hard work. My family are very supportive about me going away next week." [Participant]
- negative relationships
- fear of the unknown, and travel.

"Some of the women have never used the train before... have had no experience of getting out of the Borders, or being away from home." [Stakeholder]

Experiences of phase 2

The headline feature of the wilderness journey for the women was the outdoor, physical aspect. Participants described how they:

- felt proud of their achievements
"I'd never done abseiling before – and I'd never do it again, but I've done it!"
- learnt about working together
"The canoeing was challenging – you need to row as a team."
- learnt about trust
"I hadn't put my trust in anyone before – it's a big thing for me."
- learnt to be comfortable in a group
"We didn't know anything about each other's problems – there were no addictions to follow you – we were just a bunch of women."

- learnt to support and inspire each other.

“Sitting together, having a meal together – I’d never done anything like this before.”

Next Steps participants particularly valued the feedback that they received from staff during the wilderness journey:

“Every few days another staff member [who wasn’t your one-to-one worker] handed you a wee note: it was a real surprise. I read it and it was just lovely.”

Stakeholders who responded to the 2015 and 2017 surveys valued all aspects of the Next Steps programme, in particular the chance for women to have time and space away from the pressures of day-to-day life, and the opportunity to face a series of personal development challenges using the wilderness as a medium for learning.

Shorter term outcomes

The outcomes of the programme were measured through a combination of: Venture Trust data; focus groups with clients; and interviews and surveys of stakeholders and referring agencies. From these sources, the research evidenced impact in relation to: changes in clients’ attitudes and behaviours; success in reaching the “positive destinations” of employment, training, education or volunteering; and the client’s ability to engage with other services.

By the end of the programme, compared with the baseline measure:

- 89% of participants’ self-confidence had improved
- 84% had improved their employability
- 66% had become more stable and less likely to reoffend
- 60% had improved bonds with their community
- 60% had increased their use of community services and opportunities.

Stakeholders told interviewers:

“When they come back they’re buzzing. They always say ‘I never thought I could do it’ and ‘if I could do that, climb that rock, then I could do anything – I could go to college, get a job...’ It makes them appreciate what they’ve got. They’re more motivated.”

“They are supported when they come back, and have the opportunity to volunteer, so it’s not just a temporary window on a new world. It’s not a magic wand, but it’s a huge part of that change.”

Both women and staff talked about determination to keep moving forward following the course:

“Everything you do makes you stronger and you know you don’t want to go back to that way of life.” [Participant]

“Women who have participated in the Next Steps programme are given hope that they can learn to live a new/better way of life and feel they are given a second chance to feel like a person without a label.” [Stakeholder]

Women also talked about their improved relationships with their families:

“I got my daughter and son back – and now social work are out of my life! I got them back and I feel so brilliant.”

Medium to longer term impacts

Venture Trust data indicate that 48% of all women who started the wilderness journey achieved at least one ‘positive destination’. On average, of the women who started the wilderness journey:

- 12% went into education
- 12% achieved employment
- 20% moved into volunteering
- 21% went into training.

(NB these figures do not sum to the total of 48% of women achieving a positive destination as some women achieved multiple positive destinations, e.g. moving from volunteering to education).

Participants told us:

“I did a community development course in January to April and I had to go the uni [sic] to pick up my certificate! I’m ambitious. I want to learn, to know more. The Venture Trust certificate was the first one I’ve ever had.”

“I’m doing a SVQ in Health and Social Care – I want to be a support worker.”

One stakeholder commented:

“The women I have referred who have completed the next steps programme, due to their increased confidence and skills, find that they no longer required our service and they have been able to move on and manage well in the community with the follow up support from Venture Trust.” [Stakeholder]

As well as quantifiable results such as entering employment, medium to long-term outcomes also include factors such as regaining access to children or otherwise improving family and social bonds. Both women and stakeholders reported seeing these changes:

“I got my daughter and son back – and now social work are out of my life! I got them back and I feel so brilliant.” [Participant]

“My mum’s got my son now, but now that I’m in supported accommodation I can see him. And our relationship is very good.” [Participant]

“Some women make a conscious choice to distance themselves from relationships that may be having a negative effect on their life which may be extremely difficult for them.” [Stakeholder]

Following the Next Steps programme, women and the staff working with them also reported improved take up of local services and activities:

“I have a counsellor, have acupuncture, massage, go for a walk, do mindfulness. I used to come back from work and do my housework and then I drank.” [Participant]

The case for continued funding

Stakeholders noted the unique value of the Next Steps programme:

“It’s the outdoor experience and the range of supports that are provided to get women to the point that they can go on the course that marks Venture Trust out. I don’t know of another organisation that can provide that kind of experience.”

“Venture Trust fits very well with our objectives. It’s about the women’s self-esteem. It’s the softer outcomes to do with shared living, dealing with hardship, feeling good about themselves. They all have a background of significant trauma. It’s about broadening their horizons – we can’t provide this.”

“Next Steps adds something that we’d never be able to provide. It’s definitely part of our offer.”

Stakeholders who responded to the 2015 and 2017 surveys are very clear that there would be a gap in provision if the Next Steps programme did not exist, and that the availability of funded places across Scotland is very important.

“I’d flipping miss it – it really is the next step, opening the door on something different. The women we work with don’t have that vision, the imagination to think about how it could be.”

“It would be a sad loss if Next Steps wasn’t there – it’s unique. It expands our services – and would limit it if it wasn’t there.”

Strategic SHINE partners see the Next Steps programme as a key element of their exit strategy for women, helping to provide longer term support:

“SHINE is only for 6 months, so it’s a challenge to support women to deal with a whole host of issues. It can take 6 months to build a relationship with a woman. But Next Steps is 12 months, so it can help in looking beyond the support that we can provide. It helps the woman to build community support – support within the wider family.”

It is very clear that strategic stakeholders would find it very difficult, if not impossible, to pay for their clients to do the Next Steps programme, and this would be a loss to those who could benefit.

Conclusions

The Next Steps programme is successful at providing women who are at risk of offending the opportunity to improve their self-confidence, move towards and achieve employability, strengthen their relationships and their bonds within their community. It provides a service that is not available elsewhere, and is viewed by strategic shareholders as filling a vital gap. In the absence of continued funding, the loss of this service would have an adverse effect on support for these vulnerable women.

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