

## CASE STUDY SOCIAL ENTERPRISE: WEAR SIDE WOMEN IN NEED

Wearside Women in Need is a women's charity that delivers a range of services to women, men and children who are experiencing domestic violence, mental health difficulties and/ or social exclusion. The services include refuges, drop in centres, a 24 hour phone line and outreach work. Wearside Women in Need work with over 600 men and women a month across Sunderland and have been delivering services for Sunderland City Council since 1983.

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### About the organisation

Wearside Women in Need is a women's charity that formed in 1981 out of a grass roots community development women's group. The group originally met together informally to discuss issues they felt strongly about and domestic violence came out as one such issue.

In 1983 Wearside Women in Need began to deliver services, opening up its first refuge and women's centre. The organisation now employs over 50 members of staff, has a board of trustees, and is supported by many volunteers.

Wearside Women in Need have a significant impact across Sunderland, working with around 600 service users every month. This includes managing 82 beds, providing a 24 hour helpline to over 130 people a month, and supporting a further 400 people a month through a range of services at the drop in centres.

Despite the large number of people the organisation supports, it remains committed to being a service user led organisation – delivering projects and services that are required by their users - rather than acting 'opportunistically' and simply providing services that are not so necessary, because funding is available.

### The services delivered

#### ***Two refuges for domestic violence (one in Sunderland and one in Washington)***

Offering safe accommodation for around 60 women and children who are experiencing sexual, physical or emotional abuse. Service users receive emotional support and practical advice 24 hours a day on many issues including financial worries, access to medical services, legal issues, helping find school places for children and finding a new home. Service users are either referred to the refuge by other major service providers such as Social Services or the Police, or through calling the 24 hour help line.

#### ***'TZ'***

A residential project that supports women aged 16-18 who are homeless as a result of sexual, physical and/ or mental abuse. The project offers ten bedrooms, activity rooms, kitchens and a gym – and provides 24 hour advice,

along with a designated key worker for each women. Each user can stay until they are ready to move on and build an independent life.

### ***Beechwood***

A residential project that provides 5 bed spaces and long term support for women who are experiencing mental health difficulties as a result of difficulties in their life. The project offers service users a designated key worker and daily support.

### ***24 hour domestic help lines***

Service users can call the phone lines 24 hours a day and receive support and advice on the options they have when suffering from domestic violence.

### ***Outreach services***

Wearside Women in Need offer outreach services as part of all their residential projects. These services are not just about helping those being abused, but also working with those doing the abusing. Support and advocacy services are provided to women, children and abusive men through both one to one and group work.

### ***HAPS Homeless Action Programme***

The service provides pre-tenancy training and supported tenancies to over 40 young people aged 16-25 who are unable to maintain a tenancy without support.

### ***Three 'drop in' centres (one in Sunderland and two in Washington)***

The centres provide drop in facilities for a range of men and women suffering social exclusion, including lone parents, asylum seekers, heroin users and those suffering from domestic violence. The centres offer advice and support to their service users, along with signposting to other sources of help, clothing, meeting room facilities, kitchens, food and books etc.

## **Partner organisations**

Wearside Women in Need have effective working partnerships with major organisations in the area including the Police, Probation, Housing, Health, Social Services and other social enterprise, voluntary and community organisations. They are complimentary about the relationships with these organisations, with whom the collaborative working seems indeed, excellent. Although over 75% of referrals to Wearside Women in Need projects come from other service users through word of mouth - the organisation do also receive referrals from these key service providers.

Tackling shared issues, such as domestic violence and other forms of social exclusion across organisational boundaries through 'Joined Up Working' is imperative for delivering joined up customer-orientated solutions. Formal structures and procedures can be established that deliver services for the convenience and benefit of the service user, not the provider.

## Contracts acquired from the public sector

Wearside Women in Need have been delivering services acquired through contracts from Sunderland City Council and the public sector for many years and these are outlined below. The first contract is the major source of their workload:

- **Supporting People Programme:** Wearside Women in Need deliver their residential projects (the refuges, TZ and Beechwood) and associated outreach and phone lines, along with the supported tenancy programme, through a contract acquired from Sunderland City Councils Supporting People Programme. This is a grant funded programme paid from central government to Sunderland City Council, for the implementation of a five year strategy (from 2003) to deliver high quality, cost effective, housing related support services for a range of identified vulnerable people. Sunderland City Council have contracted out over 129 housing support services to 29 service providers – of which Wearside Women in Need is one;
- **Sure Start Violence Intervention Programme:** Wearside Women in Need work in partnership with, and are contracted by, Sure Start to implement their Violence Intervention Programme. The programme raises awareness of domestic violence, supports victims and children and works with abusive men. The organisation are contracted to work in the Sure Start areas of Sunderland, Shiney Row, Hetton and Houghton.

Wearside Women in Need also deliver a variety of other contracts including **Social Services Mental Health** and **On Track**.

The organisation receives grant aid from Sunderland Social Services to deliver **children's services for domestic violence**. This involves group work and/ or one to one sessions with children living in refuges and non-residential children – who are, or who have, experienced living with domestic violence. Wearside Women in Need have delivered this service for three years, and this has recently been renewed.

## Benefits of the social enterprise, voluntary and community sector as service providers

Wearside Women in Need are determined to stay as 'specialist, passionate, providers' in their field of service delivery. They believe that across many areas, the local voluntary and community sector are best placed to deliver services that require specialist knowledge. Local social enterprise, community and voluntary organisations will already have a good knowledge of their areas of work, links with the service users they are there to support, and an independence from the council that can make them more approachable.

Wearside Women in Need are well respected in their area of service delivery, as can be seen from the high percentage of word of mouth referrals from previous service users. They have also built up good links with the local community. Though there are

no signs or advertisement outside any of their drop in centres, local people have a good awareness of the centres and the work of the organisation and donate clothes, gifts, food and time. A public sector delivery body, or an organisation parachuted in from elsewhere, would probably be less likely to receive such a high level of support from users and the community.

## **Barriers and hurdles to service delivery**

### ***Bureaucracy***

Bidding for a contract from the local authority requires a huge amount of form filling - largely in terms of providing written evidence of what a social enterprise, community and voluntary organisation would probably comply with 'on the ground' anyway. For each contract acquired from Sunderland City Council all bidders are required to demonstrate through written evidence a wide range of legislation and policy. For Wearside Women in Need this included showing that they had, amongst many other things, a lone worker policy, anti fraud policy and management regulations etc. Writing policy takes a considerable amount of time and requires a detailed knowledge of legislation along with good written skills - organisations may have to spend considerable time and resources in researching how policy should be written and ensuring all legislation is in place. Without such legislation, bids to the local authority are more likely to fail.

### ***Maintaining wider specialist input***

Due to the increasing culture of contracting out services, it has become more difficult for Wearside Women in Need and other specialist organisations to offer advice to the local authority on their area of work, especially prior to a bid. The local authority are increasingly concerned that asking for/listening to advice from what may be a prospective bidder, could be seen as showing preferential treatment. Wearside Women in Need suggest that the government agenda for procurement is in tune with the social enterprise, community and voluntary sector and the future of service delivery, but the local authority interpretation is too narrow and bound by red tape.

### ***Competing with national charities***

Wearside Women in Need feel that local authorities are becoming increasingly keen to work with national charities - possibly because national charities are viewed by some, as more professional organisations. This is a hurdle Wearside Women in Need see as one that must be challenged. Just because a smaller, independent charity is 'different', it does not mean that it is less professional. It would be a great loss to the community if a local organisation that operates at the heart of the community were lost.

## **Processes of service delivery**

### ***The Procurement Strategy***

Sunderland City Council have developed a Procurement Strategy to ensure procurement is used effectively to deliver their vision, strategic priorities, and underpinning of service objectives - whilst achieving Best Value. The Council recognise within the strategy the important role that the voluntary sector can play in supporting the strategic priorities and provision of services, and as far as possible will

maximise the opportunities for using local suppliers. In order to gain an understanding of what the local authority is looking for within their bids, it is important to read this document. For example it is made clear that in terms of best value, regard is made to price, but *also* to quality, delivery, professional skill, efficiency, health and safety record and reliability.

### ***Finding out about contracts***

Sunderland City Council spends over £163 million on procuring out services each year. The wide range of contracts are advertised in national and local press, with larger ones also advertised in the Official Journal of European Communities.

### **Management of contracts**

The principle contract for service delivery that Wearside Women in Need hold through the Supporting People Programme, has to date been renewed annually. However the local authority are in the process of putting a three year contract out for competitive tender and cuts to the programme are being made nationally. Yet Wearside Women in Need remain confident about their future and continuing to deliver public services. They recently won their third Supporting People contract but do feel that it will become increasingly hard to secure contracts, due to higher levels of competition from national charities and housing associations.

The local authority are also becoming increasingly determined to ensure that a wide range of partners are involved in service delivery – and have expressed concern about several VCS delivery organisations seeming to ‘corner the market’. This could cause a problem for organisations such as Wearside Women in Need, limiting the level and number of services that they are allowed to deliver.

### **Advice for other social enterprise, community and voluntary organisations**

#### ***Ensure you have the necessary skills***

Wearside Women in Need fear that the amount of documentation needed to comply with Sunderland City Councils rules for procuring goods and services, could be beyond the capabilities of some small organisations. However they reinforce that this is now a vital component of securing local authority contracts. Social enterprise, voluntary and community organisations must ensure they have the skills and/or support to allow them to properly evidence the procurement policy requirements. This may mean employing someone to help with the legislation, who could also provide training to a member of staff.

#### ***Gain the Council's support***

Being known and supported by the council could help a social enterprise, voluntary and community organisation in securing and retaining contracts. It is important for a social enterprise, community and voluntary organisation to think about their profile – and whether it would be beneficial to raise it. This could be done through raising awareness amongst the general public, targeted groups, local organisations as well as the local authority.

#### ***Do not sell your service users short***

Reducing your costs too low in an attempt to win local authority contracts will only let your service users down. Above all, listen to your service users. Meeting their needs and acting as their advocates should be central to everything you do.

***Do not be afraid to challenge***

Local authorities may have a tendency to 'rubber stamp' what they see as best practice. However interventions will not work the same everywhere. Social enterprise, voluntary and community organisations should not be afraid to challenge local authorities if they feel an intervention will be to the detriment of service users. Indeed, national government has stated that the social enterprise, voluntary and community sector should act as a 'critical friend' to local authorities.

***Be prepared to work hard***

A social enterprise, community or voluntary organisation will have to be prepared to work hard to comply with legislation, secure contracts – and continue to deliver services to the highest standard.

***Be proud of being different to the mainstream***

The Social Enterprise / voluntary sector is a professional body, fully capable of delivering high quality services, on time and to budget. Do not let others presume that you are not up to their level.

