

People at the Centre Update 17



A Community Resilience Best Practice Case Study from the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit

The Scottish Violence Reduction Unit (SVRU) takes a public health approach to tackling violence in Scotland. This model of prevention considers the root causes of violence in communities and aims to develop evidence-led solutions that reduce the likelihood that an individual will become the victim or perpetrator of violence. We know that trauma is a root cause of violence and a core component of our work in Scotland involves engaging communities and working with local people in the response to violence. As such, we built this project using a trauma-informed and community led approach. As lockdown restrictions were put in place, and our team moved to working from home, at the forefront of our mind was “what role we can play in supporting those facing unprecedented challenges at the frontline of the crisis?”.

Driven by the merits of working 'with', rather than doing 'to' or 'for', we met and conducted focus groups with representatives from several frontline organisations within one local community in Glasgow that faces many challenges (e.g. poverty, organised crime, violence and an elevated need for foodbanks). The purpose of these focus groups was to invite people to tell us what they needed and have open conversations about what effective support in the recovery from the effects of COVID-19 would look like for them. In doing so, it was established that co-creating a course, which aimed to enhance the resilience of those working in these frontline roles, would be the best way forward. Further, to ensure a sustainable legacy to the model, the frontline workers and course facilitators would co-produce a train-the-trainer package so that the programme could be disseminated throughout whole organisations.

Twelve individuals from various frontline organisations across the local community met online for two hours a week across ten weeks using the Zoom video-conferencing platforms and maintained contact via email throughout the week. They participated in a collaborative, strengths-based, and trauma-informed programme (“Help the Helpers”) which was facilitated by two psychotherapeutic counsellors with expertise in the co-production and delivery of group work programmes (one of whom is a Project Manager within the SVRU). The course aimed to support participants’ resilience and recovery in response to the impact of COVID-19 by providing psycho-education and facilitating the development of practical strategies that support behaviour change, self-management, and the development of individual self-care. Sessions were conducted in line with the practice, policies, and ethical principles of the counselling profession, and creating a safe environment and system of support was key.

Feedback from attendees highlighted that participation in the programme during the crises shed new light on the importance of self-care and maintaining a work-life balance for front-line workers. Participants also appreciated the opportunity to develop a strengths-based mind-set, which tapped into possibilities and resources that are otherwise overlooked due to a tendency to focus on problems and deficits. As well as noting personal benefits, participants reported that engaging with the programme had provided them with “so many amazing tools to use” that had positively influenced their professional life. They reported feeling better able to support clients and more capable of handling the demands of the job. One participant noted feeling “more engaged, focused, and reflective” within their role. Finally it became clear that participants had benefited from the programme bringing together organisations and like-minded individuals (who were unknown to each other previously). One participant highlighted a sense of “camaraderie” and that they felt heartened at sharing a platform with those who are also “investing in and rooting for” the community.

The impact of the group work on participants was enabled by putting the community at the centre and co-creating the sessions with the frontline workers themselves. By asking participants what would make it a valuable experience for them, and inviting them to set their own criteria for success (individually and as a group) we acknowledged they are experts in themselves and were able to empower the frontline workers to adapt the course to their specific needs. In taking these steps we increased the likelihood of a mutually valuable outcome and that participants' resilience would be enhanced. The strengths-based approach and building of positive, meaningful and sustainable relationships and connection was central to the programme. As was supporting participants to become more reflective practitioners.

Whilst there were initial concerns that implementing this work online would be a challenge, the group adapted to meeting online quickly and reported benefits of doing so. Some even used the opportunity to join the group whilst abroad on holiday or during their annual leave. Another unintended consequence of the programme was the ripple effect that it had on participant's relationships with colleagues and clients, with one participant noting "the fact I can use it to help me, to help volunteers help themselves, and help those they are dealing with. It's made a hell of a difference in a really difficult time".

Looking forward, one of the key aims of this work was to ensure the model had a sustainable legacy. By co-producing a train-the-trainer course with the frontline workers the intention is these individuals will be upskilled to disseminate the group work programme to their own team. In doing so, we hope to leave behind a network of bonded, committed and upskilled individuals who are capable of passing on these tools and supporting others in the community to strengthen their resilience. As we move into our "new normal" we will continue to face challenges and feel the impact of the COVID-19. By helping the helpers and supporting those at the frontline of the crisis we have the potential to increase the resilience of individuals, organisations, families, and communities.