



University of Brighton



AN EVALUATION OF THE BRIGHTON UNEMPLOYED FAMILIES CENTRE: 2012

By Dr Carl Walker and Dr Paul Hanna





CONTENTS

3	Executive summary
5	Introduction to the Project
7	Rationale and methods
	a) Purpose of the study
	b) Participants and methods
	c) Data analysis
8	Findings/discussion
8	a) Different centre users, different needs
10	b) A resource for the desperate
11	c) Picturing life without the centre
12	d) A place to 'be' <i>and</i> a place to 'do'
17	e) How do centre users understand this culture?
18	f) The provision of a safe social space
20	g) The low cost meal
21	h) The Brighton Unemployed Centre Families Project: A centre for mental wellbeing?
24	References

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The BUCFP's principal objective is to relieve poverty, hardship and distress for people living or staying in the Brighton area

1.

The Brighton Unemployed Family Centre Project is a registered charity that was founded in 1981. Today in 2011 the centre provides a number of facilities, projects and services that combine to allow the centre to fulfil its principal charitable objective 'To relieve poverty, distress and hardship amongst unemployed, unwaged and low waged people and their families living or staying in the Brighton area regardless of race, sex, age, ability or sexual orientation'. These include daily hot vegan meals and an open-plan area open to all, welfare and housing rights and information, education, a high quality crèche as well as a number of healthy living and creative classes like art and photography.

2.

The purpose of this study was to draw upon the multiple stakeholders who use the centre to provide an evaluation of the degree to which the centre meets the needs of the families and individual users. Between February and July 2011, 21 semi-structured interviews were carried out with a range of stakeholders in the centre. 102 questionnaires were also completed by centre users.

3.

It is clear that the centre is one of the few places that is able to meet the needs of a wide range of people in the community. Through an infrastructure that fostered personal development as a result of the multiple opportunities to transition between roles and responsibilities, the centre is very much more than a sum of its parts.

4.

In line with its charitable objective, the centre fundamentally focuses its activities on disadvantaged families and individuals, and provides urgent and often crucial services to socially excluded members of the community who feel that they have no other

place to turn. In many cases the work of the centre makes a difference regarding whether people are able to eat or not, whether they are able to retain a roof over their head, or avoid losing their possessions.

5.

Whether through helping with problems of homelessness, poverty, unemployment, isolation and hunger, or most often a combination of these difficulties, the centre provides an invaluable resource for groups of people in the community who were described as 'desperate'.

6.

The centre was routinely positioned as the only resource of its kind in the area.

7.

For those who actively seek support and assistance in specific ways, for instance with regard to employment or education, the centre is well-equipped to provide support for these people. However it is not incumbent on centre users that they must use the centre to move toward a preordained endpoint.

8.

The crèche is an invaluable source of relaxation and personal space for parents of young children in the area. It provides some parents who had felt acutely isolated with a place to meet, socialise and share experiences with other parents and centre users or to be away from oppressive housing conditions or circumstances at home. It also allows them access to health and creative activities that would not have otherwise been available.

9.

For those who are ready to rejoin the labour market, the centre provides a number of opportunities and means of support to do ►



... PRACTICAL SUPPORT IN TERMS OF GIVING THEM SOME FOOD IF THEY HAVEN'T GOT IT, GIVING THEM SOME BEDDING IF THEY'RE ON THE STREETS. IF THEY ARE LUCKY TO GET SOMEWHERE, YOU KNOW GIVING THEM BITS AND BASIC THINGS TO MOVE IN WITH, POTS AND PANS, THAT SORT OF STUFF ●●

▶ so. The many volunteering opportunities at the centre like cooking, caring for children, educating others, administration in the office allow them to reconnect with old skills, abilities and habits, which may not have been used for a number of years due to their encountering difficulties. For some, there is a reawakening or a reconnection with previous capabilities and of previous ways of being in their neighbourhoods and communities.

10.

The ethos of the BUCFP provides a set of potential options that allow the different centre users to find routes to self-sufficiency. They provide support for short-term pathways into employment as well as viable, worthwhile and fulfilling alternatives to such pathways.

11.

The staff were characterised not only as helpful but as actively reaching out to the people who came into the centre. Moreover there were a number of reflections on a more generic culture of kindness that was pervasive in the centre, a culture that is both unique and essential.

12.

The centre has a clear socialising effect. Particularly important was the impact that this socialising effect of the centre can have on people's wellbeing and specifically their mental health. While the centre has not been formulated with the intention of explicitly improving the mental health of centre users, it has, through numerous mechanisms, had a very significant impact in this domain.

13.

The open space and tea bar is a central feature of what many people described as the beneficial properties of the centre. Many of the people who come to the centre are given space and, where appropriate, support to deal with their problems. The capacity of people to reconnect with their communities and for some to redefine their identities, skills and sense of self through being with others, undertaking health and creative

classes like art and photography and through taking part in education classes at their own speed, is an essential part of the what the centre offers to users.

14.

The centre is a place where people can go and make friends with other people in a similar position to themselves. Such a space may seem relatively banal and technically simplistic, but for many it is an essential first step to changing the way that they understand themselves and their capabilities.

15.

One of the key elements that places the centre in a strong position to challenge the experiences of social isolation and alienation that many users have experienced is the low cost meal. In an instrumental sense the low cost meal is an essential service that can be the only regular meal that many centre users have during a given day and this makes it an incredibly important local provision. However the inherently social nature of communal eating is also very important as a natural vehicle with which to bring people together.

16.

Even though it is accepted by staff and trustees that the centre is not a mental health centre, the accounts of interviewees suggest that mental wellbeing is a central issue in terms of the way in which the centre operates. It provides a community platform for some of the centre users to move from alienation and lack of purpose to finding a sense of meaning through working with people experiencing circumstances and histories similar to theirs.

17.

Centres like the BUCFP foster networks and opportunities for disadvantaged people in a way that statutory services find difficult; where an environment is provided that allows people to get help, information and community interaction without waiting behind a glass partition. Centre users are not required to develop the identity of the 'helped' in order to access this. ■



The BUCF's crèche gives parents the opportunity to attend vocational and non-vocational courses at the centre

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT



THE CRÈCHE IS BRILLIANT, I AM SURPRISED THERE ARE NOT QUEUES AROUND THE BLOCK TO GET IN, IT'S A REALLY LOVELY CHILDCARE ENVIRONMENT, IT'S VERY WELL RUN, IT'S NICER THAN WHAT YOU EXPECT FROM A NURSERY EXCEPT IT'S A LOVELY FIRST STEP FOR PARENTS AND CHILDREN ●●

The Brighton Unemployed Family Centre Project is a registered charity that was founded in 1981. Today in 2012 the centre provides a number of facilities, projects and services that combine to allow the centre to fulfil its principal charitable objective 'To relieve poverty, distress and hardship amongst unemployed, unwaged and low waged people and their families living or staying in the Brighton area regardless of race, sex, age, ability or sexual orientation'.

The centre is open Monday to Friday 10-4pm (10.15 on Tuesdays) and is characterised by a large open-plan area. This area is open to any member of the public and includes a play area for children. There are a number of other adjoining rooms that, together with the open-plan area, house the services and activities on offer at the centre. The floor below houses the main office and the offices of the paid workers.

The people who use the centre come from a diverse range of backgrounds with many drawn from people experiencing

poverty and other forms of disadvantage (Stone, 2007).

A group of paid workers collectively manage the centre on a day to day basis and they are overseen by a smaller group of trustees who have largely been drawn from volunteers and centre users. The centre has a substantial number of volunteers who administer many of the projects and services and these volunteers are typically drawn from centre users. Volunteers comprise people who have used the services and facilities of the centre as well as those whose first contact is in a volunteering capacity.

Although daily numbers are not collated, it is estimated that the centre has in the region of 100 visitors per day. They expect to serve around 40 large vegan meals and 20 small meals at lunch although this number fluctuates. Over a calendar year it is expected that around 300 people volunteer. The centre currently has a paid workers group of 8 staff and there are 7 trustees on the managements committee. ►



The centre's low-cost meals attract centre users, volunteers and staff every day and helps to promote a community feeling

► **Some of the areas of work and services that the centre provides includes:**

● **Food and open-plan area:** The centre provides a daily, hot, low cost vegan lunch for centre users, volunteers and staff which is planned and prepared by volunteers in the kitchen. The centre also has a low cost tea bar that is open for anyone visiting the centre. In this area visitors are able to drop in, spend time, take advantage of the tea bar facilities, use the internet and socialise with other centre users. They are also free to spend time on their own should they wish. The area contains a number of tables, chairs and sofas and is decorated throughout by various pieces of artwork produced by centre users during the art classes. The centre also has an allotment project where volunteers, centre users and staff work together to tend a piece of local land and produce food for the centre.

● **Welfare rights and information:** The centre provides high quality and confidential drop-in advice sessions on a range of social welfare issues. This includes benefits advice, representation for tribunals and appeals, employment advice, home visits and telephone advice.

● **Housing:** The centre provides advice, information, services and support for families and individuals living in insecure accommodation in Brighton and Hove.

● **Education:** The centre offers a range of affordable computer, and language courses as well as healthy living classes in art, photography, yoga, dance, cookery, creative

writing, coping with stress and Mind workshops.

● **Crèche:** The centre houses a free, high quality crèche for children up to the age of 8 years old. It also houses family support initiatives including a toy library and a stock of emergency clothing. The centre provides Pre-school Learning Alliance's Doorstep courses in childcare training, Understanding and Managing Behaviour, Child Protection and Storytelling/Imaginative Play and a number of volunteers undertake NVQs in childcare and use the playroom as their placement. This results in a number of volunteers moving on to paid employment in childcare or teaching. Parents are required to stay on site when their children are in the crèche and this allows many parents the space to pursue vocational and non-vocational courses within the centre as well as, for some, a much needed space to relax and socialise.

● **Office:** The downstairs office offers volunteering opportunities that include general administration, answering the phone, greeting people, room bookings, booking people onto courses and managing petty cash.

The centre also runs regular projects and initiatives outside of the areas above. Two examples of current projects include the development of a homeless guide to Brighton and the Turner History project, which collects memories from the clearances from the area in the 1950s. ■



... BUT THE FOOD ITSELF, THE WHOLE EATING ASPECT OF IT, MAKES PEOPLE TALK ●●

RATIONALE AND METHODS



21 participants were asked in separate interviews how they experienced the centre, the quality of the services and how they might be improved

a) Purpose of the study

This evaluation was carried out by a member of staff from the School of Applied Social Sciences at the University of Brighton. The purpose of the study was to draw upon the multiple stakeholders who use the centre to provide an evaluation of the degree to which the centre meets the needs of the families and individual users.

The aims were three-fold:

- To explore the degree to which the centre **meets the needs** of the families and individuals who use it.
- To **evaluate the various services, projects and facilities** offered by the centre with a view to improving and/or redesigning services, projects and facilities.
- To **explore potential improvements** that the centre could undertake to better improve user and volunteer experience

b) Participants and methods

Between February and July 2011, 21 semi-structured interviews were carried out with a range of stakeholders in the centre. This comprised 5 members of the paid worker group (PWG), 1 trustee, 8 users of the centre and 7 volunteers.

Users were recruited through approaching people in the open-plan area, explaining the purpose of the research and asking if they would like to take part. Both the volunteers and the users of the centre varied in terms of how long they had been involved in the centre, ranging from a few months to seventeen years. The centre users ranged from those who used it daily or almost daily to those who only dropped in to the centre on an intermittent basis when they required the use of a specific service.

Five of the centre users identified as parents whose children had at some point used either the crèche or the art classes. It should be noted that some participants had used the centre in more than once capacity. For instance the majority of volunteers had

started as centre users before later becoming volunteers. One member of the PWG had in fact been both a centre user and a volunteer before becoming a paid member of staff.

All interviews were carried out individually either in a separate office room in the basement of the building or in a quiet corner of the open-plan area and all interviews were tape recorded. The researcher also undertook some participation observation at the centre. This included taking part in a photography project charting the 30 years of the centre and spending a number of mornings in the open-plan area.

The interviews focused on a number of key areas including the reasons people use the centre, what they feel that they needed from the centre, the nature and quality of the services used, positive aspects of the centre and potential improvements. The impact of the centre on peoples' day to day lives was explored.

This qualitative information was supplemented by quantitative data which was collected through a questionnaire that was designed by the researcher in conjunction with staff at the centre. This questionnaire focused on socio-demographic information, centre users' opinions on the centre and its services, the impact that the centre has had on their lives (if any) and potential improvements. 102 questionnaires were confidentially completed by centre users.

This research achieved ethical approval from the Faculty Research Ethics and Governance Committee (FHREG) of the University of Brighton.

c) Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interviews. Thematic analysis is a pragmatically and theoretically flexible analytic paradigm (Braun & Clarke, 2006) that allows researchers to identify, analyse and report patterns within qualitative data. It is ideal for semi-structured interviews where similarities and differences between accounts form key components following which representative themes are developed. ■

FINDINGS/ DISCUSSION



The people who use the centre fall into two broad groups

a) Different centre users, different needs

From the range of interviews it became clear that the people who used the centre were predominantly characterised in two ways.

First group

Firstly people spoke of the centre as a resource for a wide range of families and individuals with very different needs and aspirations. Moreover it became clear that the centre was one of the few places that was able to cater for this wide range of needs. The questionnaire revealed that 92% of centre users used the centre once a week or more and a range of reasons brought users to the centre. 18% came to the centre to volunteer, 23% to take the courses, 3% because it had been recommended to them by other centre users and 11% to gain advice of some sorts. 13% came specifically for the food. As for the reasons that centre users currently use the centre, 50% say it is for benefits advice, 49% say it is to be healthy, 48% for the classes, 39% for housing advice, 25% say it is due to the crèche and 77% for the lunch. As one can

see, the size of these percentages reveals that centre users most commonly have multiple reasons for bringing them to the centre on a regular basis.

In its capacity to meet the needs of a wide range of people in the community, and through an infrastructure that fostered personal development as a result of the multiple opportunities to transition between roles and responsibilities, there was a feeling that the centre was, like other family centres in the UK (Warren Adamson, 2006), very much more than a sum of its parts. These following quotes make clear not only the range of options open to the people who walk through the door of the centre but also their capacity to choose exactly how they wish to engage with the centre

“...they just want to just get on and do something, use the computers, they can do that, if they want to be left alone they can but if they want to kind of get swooped up they can...” Participant 1, mental health worker,

“...you've got all those practical things and within it, it's not a kind of housing centre but people can help with housing, it's not a benefits place but obviously there's the benefit ►



THERE'S AN ETHOS OF THIS CENTRE AND THAT'S KINDNESS AND THAT WORD SHOULD BE WRITTEN LARGE ABOVE THIS PLACE ●●



I DON'T THINK THERE'S MANY PLACES WHERE ACTUALLY, ACROSS THE BOARD, COMMUNITIES COME TOGETHER ANY MORE, YOU KNOW, PEOPLE ARE KIND OF TAKEN OFF AND SEGREGATED INTO DIFFERENT AREAS AND SORTED OUT KIND OF INDIVIDUALLY

- ▶ service so, and I like the way that people, you know people come to it from very different ways." Participant 1, mental health worker,

Participant 2, one of the members of the PWG, talked of how, although many people who came to centre were in extreme distress, a great number weren't. She noted that a substantial number of people came to "use say, the playroom and that enables them to have some time to themselves or some time to do something else when their children are very small, that they couldn't get anywhere else".

The importance of this capacity to find time and space is discussed at greater length below. In catering for those without specific instrumental needs such as the use of services or the low cost food, the centre takes on a crucially important preventative capacity for many of the users.

"...but the key point here is keeping people out of a situation where they might have become desperate, and my experience, I was quite young when my kids were born and finding this place I think made a massive difference to my state of mind and my experience of their early childhood."

Participant 2, PWG staff

For some the importance of the centre lies in its capacity to help them make the most of the period during which they have found themselves out of work. Indeed 48% of centre users currently use the centre because they believe it will help them get a job. For these people the centre provided not only a constructive means to use their time but a means through which to help them make the transition from worklessness to employment. For these centre users their volunteering was used as a tool through which to gain skills, confidence and, in some cases, a reference to help them move back into the labour market. For others, volunteering at the centre was an end in itself, a worthwhile and rewarding way to reconnect with, and contribute something to, the people in their community

"I first started coming here in December last year. Ah, I think I was looking to sort of do some volunteering anyway because being unemployed I just wanted to do something."

Participant 4, centre user

"I was looking to get involved in the community I think, and this was the place that best fitted that description of community involvement really." Participant 3, trustee

"I saw it as a kind of, as a job I'd like to do, you know, rather than as a stepping stone to something else, like it was an end in itself really." Participant 3, trustee

Second group

The second group of people were those who were characterised as being in dire or desperate circumstances. Although this group did not necessarily constitute the majority of centre users on any given day, the sheer magnitude of their needs, and indeed the huge impact of the centre on their lives, makes it important to recognise this contribution.

In line with its charitable objective, the centre fundamentally focused its activities on disadvantaged families and individuals and provided urgent and often crucial services to socially excluded members of the community who felt that they had no other place to turn. In many cases the work of the centre made a difference regarding whether people were able to eat or not, whether they were able to retain a roof over their head, or avoid losing their possessions. The centre was able to provide practical support, social support and respite for many people experiencing despair and destitution.

Bjarnason & Sigurdardottir (2003) note the considerable economic strain and psychological distress often associated with the experience of being unemployed. For many, one of the key challenges includes navigating their way around an opaque benefit system. The work of the centre was able to ameliorate much of this strain

"I mean they've had their benefits withdrawn, so they have no money at all, no idea how to access public funds because the systems are unhelpful and complicated and deliberately obstructive on occasions, and they need somebody to help them, guide them through what they can do and how they can apply for a crisis loan, whether they can appeal to the benefits offices to get their money reinstated." Participant 5, PWG staff

"I think literally, kind of saving people's lives occasionally with the benefits advice. We're making a tremendous difference to people's lives just by giving them the kind of advice and filling forms in for them that they wouldn't get done anywhere else."

Participant 5, PWG staff

For some of the people who use the centre, even the most banal support or intervention, something that many people may take for granted, has had a profound

► effect on the lives of the centre users. A centre user for 3 years noted how one of the workers had advocated for the user on a problem of housing. This involved a telephone call that eventually cleared up a problem of communication that had led to one centre user and her young child being threatened with eviction.

“Sort of like, when somebody were having a lot of problems with the housing, I think it were Julie who dealt with it, or Joy or someone, I can’t remember, somebody were having a lot of problem with the housing and they come here, sorted it, sorted it in a couple of hours, “You don’t know what you’re talking about, she’s paid her bloody electric, she’s paid her rent,” you know what I mean? To be evicted with a kid an all, and eventually paid the rent.” Participant 6, centre user

“... they’d sent me all the different things, you know, so it was real, it felt very overwhelming at the time and I was very, very appreciative of having someone who had a logistical head or you know, a legal head that could actually look through that and decide what was, sort the wheat from the chaff.” Participant 7, centre user

Participant 6, a centre user of three years, described how one of the workers at the centre called the water board on his behalf. He said that he struggled to communicate with them and this had led to frustration and anger in the past. “... and they’ll speak on my behalf because I don’t really want to talk to them. ...because, I do sometimes but there’s just a lot of crap they go on about, if you know what I mean”.

Although such an activity was relatively straightforward for the worker, it was one that caused the centre user real difficulty and may well have led to a serious deterioration in his circumstances had he not communicated with the water board in terms of his bill.

Some observer’s may lack sympathy for participant 6’s predicament. They may feel that he should take personal responsibility for his own circumstances and manage his own everyday affairs. However such an attitude fails to reflect the reality of many people who live in our communities. In fact participant 6 was managing his affairs in general very well and had been living on his own for a number of years since leaving prison. However when he encountered a difficulty with the water board he felt that he was unable to communicate effectively to address this.

Although the accepted norm of personal responsibility is deeply embedded in our social consciousness (Harper, 1991, Furnham & Proctor, 1989), the reality is that some community members benefit hugely from such interventions. Through the activities and support in the centre, people are often able to develop their capacity to address situations like these but many do not and such a service can be crucially important.

b) A resource for the desperate

There was a feeling both from centre users and staff that a substantial element of the centre’s work concerned people who found themselves in situations characterised by severe deprivation and despair. The questionnaire showed that 57% of centre users were currently unemployed or on incapacity benefit, 35% of centre users had inadequate housing, 35% were homeless and 60% had mental health problems, the most common of which were depression and anxiety. When asked about the problems that most affected them, the centre user discussed poverty related issues like homelessness, debt, financial worries, housing costs and mental health.

Whether through helping problems of homelessness, poverty, unemployment, isolation and hunger, or most often a combination of these difficulties, there was a feeling that the centre provided an invaluable resource for groups of people in the community who were described as ‘desperate’. A centre user, who later became a volunteer, described as these people as the ‘displaced’.

“It’s not about dysfunction this place, it’s about displacement, this is a place for the displaced. And they can’t fit the model, they cannot, I couldn’t survive within the model.” Participant 8, volunteer

“...the general characteristic is, I think, they’ve been beaten by the system, you know, they have lost. They’re the losers from society, to recover from the damage that’s been done to them, the feeling of lack of, total lack of self-esteem and self-respect and their lack of trust in people and situations. They’ve come to a point where it’s survival.” Participant 5, PWG staff

For many centre users, the ‘damage that ►



I THINK LITERALLY, KIND OF SAVING PEOPLE’S LIVES OCCASIONALLY WITH THE BENEFITS ADVICE. WE’RE MAKING A TREMENDOUS DIFFERENCE TO PEOPLE’S LIVES JUST BY GIVING THEM THE KIND OF ADVICE AND FILLING FORMS IN FOR THEM THAT THEY WOULDN’T GET DONE ANYWHERE ELSE



► had been done to them' impacted on their potential to live lives that might tentatively be described as 'normal'. That is, characterised by stable employment, stable mental wellbeing and a capacity to maintain a rented or purchased home. Many of these were people who had become displaced, and drifted to the margins of contemporary society, lacking in self-worth and any sense of trust or faith in that society. The centre had the capacity to work with many, although by no means all, of these people in innovative and compelling ways. For those unable to 'fit the model', the centre played an integral role in helping people to live meaningful lives, develop personally and avoid the strictures of confinement via the mental health and prison systems.

Of course such a category as 'displaced' fails to really describe the many different histories, motivations, ambitions and needs of what in effect is a wide array of people who regularly draw upon the centre. For some, the practical support that the centre offers in terms of low-cost hot meals is simply an essential part of everyday survival. For others it offers a key support in the battle to facilitate accommodation. For other people the centre is a base that provides a level of reassurance and peace of mind that there will always be forms of support for some of the complex challenges that might befall them.

"...practical support in terms of giving them some food if they haven't got it, giving them some bedding if they're on the streets. If they are lucky to get somewhere, you know giving them bits and basic things to move in with, pots and pans, that sort of stuff."
Participant 9, PWG staff

"Yeah, that might be their only meal of the day." Participant 10, volunteer/trustee

"....so for people who have, who have no fixed abode, don't have anywhere to live, are street homeless, they aren't gonna have those things at all. So they're always fighting a battle to try and get into any sort of accommodation that's of any, anything decent really. So it's very difficult."
Participant 9, PWG staff

"Yeah, yeah, absolutely, yeah definitely, I think, yeah because it's, I don't know it's just like a, it's sort of like a base where it doesn't matter how far away you go or how you know, how much you change, the centre is always here." Participant 11, centre user



c) Picturing life without the centre

Without prompting, a number of the participants reflected on where they pictured themselves had the centre not existed. In so doing, they routinely positioned the centre as the only resource of its kind in the area.

Participants acknowledged that other organisations in Brighton provided elements of the centre experience. However these organisations were characterised by a different 'feeling' or 'ethos'; one where centre users often felt pushed toward activities or pathways they were not ready for, or that made them uncomfortable. There was also a lack of some of the key elements of the BUCFP, such as free childcare, education that is affordable for those on benefits, low cost meals and an all-day relaxed and safe social space to bring people together, to name but a few. It was for a number of different reasons that interviewees felt that the centre was unique and indispensable, a feature that highlighted what a disparate impact that the centre had had in the Tarnar community and beyond. Indeed only 1% of centre users felt that the centre had failed to meet their needs in some way.

"The only place that I know of that offers totally free child care of such a high standard and, again, that brings in quite a specific group of people, always female, mostly female, mostly single parents." Participant 5, PWG staff

BUCFP staff, volunteers and centre users protest against the Coalition Government's public spending cuts

- “St George’s is much the same, I think. Salvation Army, places like that, is open for an hour or two for the meal then you go again. There’s not somewhere like upstairs where you can sit all day if you want. No one’s going to bother if you sit there at a table all day reading a book or whatever.” Participant 5, PWG staff

“I don’t think there’s many places where actually, across the board, communities come together any more, you know, people are kind of taken off and segregated into different areas and sorted out kind of individually.” Participant 7, centre user

“...it’s great to be able to offer that cheap... you know, having been on benefits for three or four years, its hell, it’s fucking hell, so to be able to get some... of that training for five quid, I mean five quid’s hard to... hard to afford so it’s brilliant. And the computer access... brilliant”. Participant 12, volunteer

Participants volunteered their estimations on where they, and the community, would be without the centre. A member of the PWG noted that “it’s those most vulnerable people with no money, potentially, at all, in a desperate situation and unable to get help from anywhere else, basically, because there’s nowhere else that would give the kind of advice that we could give.”

Participant 8, a volunteer, discussed his long and difficult history of mental health problems and problems with the psychiatric establishment, labelled the centre his ‘Port in a storm’. He reflected that there were very few in society generally and especially few that were capable of assimilating all manner of individuals. For him this centre was and is central, both to his recovery and to his continued wellbeing. For one volunteer, kindness was the key element of the centre, so simple and yet so often missing from the many other institutions charged with supporting the vulnerable in society

“...the ethos of this centre and that’s kindness and that word should be written large above this place. And that’s what’s being written out of the whole system, the DHSS had a lot of kindness, the mental health assessment on me, which I’d never had before, ...There’s not that personal relationship, that’s gone, the kindness has gone there. ...this place stands for that old ethos.” Participant 8, volunteer

Participant 2, a member of staff,

unequivocally described the centre as a lifeline. Moreover the form that this lifeline takes is very different for different people. For young parents, isolated and cut off from previous social points of reference, a “place like this is a lifeline because you come and you meet other people in the same situation, even if you only come half a day a week you’re going to meet 5, 10, 15 other parents.”

The effects of being able to meet other people and spend time with them are discussed in greater detail below. Suffice to say that they become central to the wellbeing of the parent and their capacity to reconnect with their communities. For Participant 6, a centre user of three years, the effects of the centre were wholly different but equally important

“If I hadn’t come here, I’d have probably been in and out of prison for the rest of me life...”. Participant 6, centre user

d) A place to ‘be’ and a place to ‘do’

The BUCFP as a vehicle for change

Like the best community resources, the centre allows different people to understand themselves differently at different time points, sometimes receiving help, sometimes giving it (Sanders & Mumford, 2006). In one sense the Brighton Unemployed Families Centre Project resembles Healthy Living centres like Bromley by Bow (Ramm, 1998) in terms of the range of creative and healthy ►





**... JUST DOING AN ACTIVITY,
SOMETHING CREATIVE, SOMETHING
DIFFERENT, LEARNING A
LANGUAGE CAN, I THINK CAN
BREAK A CYCLE OF DEPRESSION
OR DESPENCY OR A FEELING
OF DESPAIR** ●●



► living classes that are on offer. However one key difference is in the ethos, the ‘feel’ of the centre, and the ways in which paid workers, volunteers and centre users interact.

The central focus of many health living centres is to position centre users in such a way that they actively take responsibility for their own lives (Ramm, 1998). In this sense the centre differs. While for some of the people who come to the centre, people who actively seek support and assistance in specific ways (such as education or employment), the centre is undoubtedly well equipped to provide support. However it is not incumbent on centre users that they must in some sense use the centre to move toward a preordained endpoint that they may not currently, or indeed ever be, ready to move toward.

For those who are ready to take steps back into what might be considered more normative lifestyles and identities, and centrally, to rejoin the labour market, the centre provides a number of opportunities and means of support to do so.

Volunteering is a central pathway and activity in the day-to-day running of the centre and there is a strong research literature that outlines the different ways in which people can benefit from volunteering. Mellor et al (2009) showed that the activity of volunteering led to higher personal and neighbourhood wellbeing. So long as our lives are embedded in social contexts, the way that we interact in these contexts, and feel about them, is hugely important in determining our wellbeing.

Within the centre people talked about how their volunteering helped them to reconnect in some sense with their communities. Cohen (2009) found an individual feeling of empowerment among clients who engaged in volunteer work and that the feeling of being wanted, needed and useful could have a profound effect on people’s self-worth and confidence.

Volunteers at the BUCFP are not only able to learn new skills, which impact their confidence hugely (Kilpatrick et al 2010); the many volunteering opportunities at the centre like cooking, caring for children, educating others and administration in the office, allow them to reconnect with old skills, abilities and habits, which may not have been used for a number of years following the difficulties that they have encountered. For some, there is a reawakening or a reconnection with previous capabilities and of previous ‘ways of being’ in their neighbourhoods and communities

“ suffering from depression, from being poor and, sort of, alienated, and so I can only, best example is to use myself. When I started coming here it changed my whole outlook on my situation, realising that “God, you can get involved, you can do this, you can do that” and going home thinking “Oh that was really, you know...” and that was, I, self-worth, you know, going home thinking “Oh, I made a little bit of a difference today” you know what I mean?” Participant 3, trustee

“Ah, I get a certain satisfaction out of it obviously, yeah. You know it’s a sort of sense of you know, putting something back rather than, you know rather than taking anything you’re giving something back, yeah so you sort of get self-esteem... Yeah, self-esteem, confidence, all those types of things I think.” Participant 4, centre user

“I mean I’ve worked with people that have done volunteering here and they have kind of, they’ve got so much, and even if they haven’t gone on to get paid work afterwards they’ve got skills and experience and sort of self-worth and it’s improved their self-esteem and all of those things anyway...” Participant 1, mental health worker,

“Yeah, confidence, that’s what I didn’t have it, I didn’t have it when I first come here, I were lost if you know what I mean...” Participant 6, centre user

Volunteering is also known to improve social and psychological resources that can help people to counter negative moods, anxiety and depression (Musick & Wilson, 2003). Through volunteering, people not only gain in confidence and reassess their perceptions of themselves and their abilities but it also provides a regular structure to challenge the debilitating isolation that many centre users have experienced. Indeed as the Institute for Volunteering research shows, volunteering acts as a point of social contact, a source of friendships and an opportunity to work as a team

“Um, it was my road back to employment, and possibly back to health, but I’d been... I’d been ill for a couple of years, I had a breakdown and was quite seriously ill and housebound for eight months, six to eight months or something, almost, so was really not well.” Participant 12, volunteer

“...just doing an activity, something creative, something different, learning a



WHEN I STARTED COMING HERE IT CHANGED MY WHOLE OUTLOOK ON MY SITUATION, REALISING THAT ‘GOD, YOU CAN GET INVOLVED, YOU CAN DO THIS, YOU CAN DO THAT’ AND GOING HOME THINKING ‘OH THAT WAS REALLY, YOU KNOW...’ AND THAT WAS, I, SELF-WORTH, YOU KNOW, GOING HOME THINKING ‘OH, I MADE A LITTLE BIT OF A DIFFERENCE TODAY’ YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN? ●●



► language can, I think can break a cycle of depression or despondency or a feeling of despair” Participant 5, PWG staff

“Because I think it’s that thing about what impacts on our mental health and isolation is a huge thing that impacts on mental health and this reduces isolation, you know lack of knowledge of your rights and services, so it’s like being disempowered has a huge impact on mental health and this kind of gives people that space.” Participant 1, mental health worker,

“I know that coming to the centre, you know what I mean, their sort of time at the centre the following day will prevent people reoffending, it prevents people getting too depressed and talking about doing stupid things to themselves, do you know what I mean?” Participant 13, volunteer

For a number of the people who regularly attend the centre and volunteer, their activities and labour at the centre leads directly to employment opportunities. 53% of centre users agreed or strongly agreed that the using the centre had improved their chances of being employed and 60% believed that it had improved their future opportunities in general. Moreover in terms of personal skills, 66% of centre users agreed or strongly agreed that using the centre had in some sense improved their personal skills.

The experience of volunteering, of coming to understand the contribution that they can make through the eyes of other people in the centre, helps them to develop their self-worth (Davidson et al 2001). Volunteering can help to mobilise such a fundamental change as regaining a sense of personhood and citizenship, not through specialised professional interventions but through working in a meaningful way with other people who are often in similar circumstances to themselves

“...so I did the Council-run training, which is held here, the welfare rights training, and that gave me the skills to become a welfare rights volunteer. So then I did that for over, for nearly a year, I think, that’s a rough date so I can’t remember exactly, and then through the experience of being a welfare rights volunteer I got my current job, so I was two-and-a-half years unemployed...” Participant 3, Trustee

“We’re not just a placement for people who are already doing it. We’re probably offering the opportunity for somebody who

might otherwise not take up, you know, like, go on to maybe get NVQ and then get work.” Participant 5, PWG staff

“So I did also training for early years, early years and that is useful, that has been useful for me to find work in primary school, to teach French in primary school, to have the experience at the crèche so with little children...” Participant 14, centre user

“...but there was someone that for a long time she would volunteer on a Friday so I would see her on a Friday, so I got to know her quite well, and then yeah she left because she got paid work so yeah, there is that progression...” Participant 1, mental health worker

A prominent feature that arose out of the interviews concerned both the quality and facilitative nature of the crèche. For some parents the crèche provided valuable time that they could use to develop their skills and to learn. This provided another potential pathway through which centre users were able to benefit in terms of their future employability.

“...you have to stay in the centre while your child’s in the play room, so quite often they get involved in other aspects and then volunteer a little bit in the play room, and then quite often take courses. Judy was talking about the child care course, five week child care course they’re running. They do all sorts of early years foundation courses, parenting courses.” Participant 5, PWG staff

“The crèche is brilliant, I am surprised there are not queues around the block to get in, it’s a really lovely childcare environment, it’s very well run, it’s nicer than what you expect from a nursery except it’s a lovely first step for parents and children.” Participant 15, centre user

The crèche was also an invaluable source of relaxation and personal space for parents of young children in the area. It allowed some parents who had felt acutely isolated, and who were potential victims of the well-established link between mental health difficulties and isolation, a place to meet, socialise and share experiences with other parents and centre users or to be away from oppressive housing conditions or circumstances at home. These friendships, support and relief from isolation are known to be invaluable for many parents (Cigno, 1988). It also allowed them access to health ►



YEAH. BECAUSE IT'S RARE FOR PEOPLE, I THINK THE CENTRE USERS THAT COME IN HERE, THAT FEELING OF SAFETY IS SOMETHING THEY DON'T GET ANYWHERE ELSE, OR IT'S RARE FOR THEM TO GET IT, WHICH MAYBE IS HARD FOR FUNDERS TO UNDERSTAND ●●

The ethos of the centre is hands-on for those who are ready to work, and hands-off for those who are not

- ▶ and creative activities that would not have otherwise been available

"I had a daughter under one year old and I hadn't any... I didn't know how to manage to have some free time so the crèche was where my first... I was spoken about it by a friend of mine it was a centre, it was for unemployed and low wage so I was unemployed at the time, I am self-employed now so not really, I bit employed." Participant 14, centre user

"It was very difficult period, I just came in England two months before, it was really to have a bit of relaxation to, even to, because we were in very small place, our home, it's very dark and damp and this was to breathe a bit, to have more space." Participant 14, centre user

"...but it's lovely just to have the time to you know sit and talk to other mums or you know make some phone calls and just play with Poppy, yeah so, yeah it's fantastic." Participant 15, centre user

A place to be

It is the case however that many people are not ready, capable or interested in active projects of development or rehabilitation. For a number of people the centre provides a safe, comfortable space where people can come and benefit in a number of ways. A significant proportion of these people may have long histories of relationships with a

variety of service providers such as welfare agencies, unemployment services and the mental health system. These relationships have often been characterised by their being persuaded, cajoled or forced into certain behaviours and activities.

Many people who came to the centre had previously been subject to inflexible rules and agencies that had little to offer those who were not immediately willing and/or capable of undertaking what often constituted low wage, entry level jobs. Davis (2007) suggests that the 'work ethic' has come to be seen as a necessary component of modern citizenship and so much so that the absence of a work ethic in a person at a given time determines a person's qualifications for assistance and ultimately moral personhood. This could be suggested to be a prominent feature of recent incarnations of workfare in the UK. However recent workfare policy rarely considers the impact of a labour market that is increasingly characterised by pervasive unemployment and chronically insecure, low paid, poor work (Simmons, 2009).

In such a regime many of those who have been 'beaten by the system, damaged or marginalised through poverty, exclusion and despair are publicly viewed as deviant dependents who require immediate exposure to employment to reacquire their self-worth. Whether through dependence on mental health services, the welfare system or a combination of these, these people are repeatedly exposed to the pathologisation of their non-working lifestyle' (Theodore & Peck, 1999).

However they are also frequently and repeatedly failed by a system that does not let them devise their own routes to self-sufficiency. The ethos of the BUCFP in some sense provides a route which counters this dominant discourse by doing exactly that – it provides a set of potential options that allow the different centre users to find their own route to self-sufficiency. As a result, 73% of centre users say that they use the centre because they can 'be themselves in the centre' and 74% of centre users use the centre because they feel included. Hence the hands-off approach, that is, providing a space where people are not pushed into behaving in certain ways or doing certain activities, is key to the popularity of the centre.

The BUCFP provides, uniquely, both support for short-term pathways into employment as well as viable, worthwhile and fulfilling alternatives to such pathways. Moreover there is an acknowledgement that paid work is not the only way to achieve social inclusion (Simmons, 2009)





... IF SOMEBODY NEEDS HELP, SOMETIMES IT'S REALLY, THE HARDEST THING IS TO GO AND ASK FOR HELP, SO YOU CAN COME ALONG HERE, YOU DON'T HAVE TO ASK FOR HELP, YOU DON'T HAVE TO, YOU KNOW, ENGAGE ON THAT LEVEL BUT YOU'RE GETTING SUPPORT AND HELP AND ACCEPTANCE AND THAT FRIENDLY WORD AND, A SORT OF, JUST SOMEBODY SAYING "HOW ARE YOU?" ●●

► “We’re not trying to stop people working but, on the other hand, we don’t believe in pushing people towards employment. We’re quite happy for people to be unemployed and remain unemployed should they wish to do so. If people don’t want to be employed that’s fine by us.” Participant 5, PWG staff

“...well, that’s our ideal”, and obviously people come here and they just want to hang out, it’s not our place to delve in to their personal life and go, “why don’t you get a fill on and go and do something more structured”, you know?” Participant 2, PWG Staff

“...but no, my feeling is that we shouldn’t be encouraging people to do anything other than once they say, “I’d like to do this”, and we encourage them to, if they said they want to do it, I think we should in a sense be as passive as possible.” Participant 2, PWG Staff

“Some places ask why you’re doing this you know, what’s your plan, move you on. Whereas we don’t, we don’t ask that. If people want that help then obviously we’ll offer it, but we don’t, you know it’s not hassle, you know like you have to do this.” Participant 9, PWG staff

“I’ve had people say that, you know, how good it is just to have a bit of space to be left, you know, left to just get on with it and you know you’ve given us a cup of a tea and you’ve smiled and you’ve been polite and you’ve listened to what I’ve had to say.” Participant 9, PWG staff

Some people who have been away from the labour market for a prolonged time, the displaced and ‘losers of society’ that participant 5 mentioned earlier, cannot readily be positioned into immediate work for a variety of reasons. And a dominant feature of the centre is that there is no concerted impulse to do so. People are free to come to use the services, to spend time, to be with other people and to leave without being framed in certain ways as regards their future activities and aspirations.

For people who have been used to being the subject of such disciplinary practices, the centre is a welcome and refreshing space to spend time. In fact one might argue that the very freedom and flexibility offered by the centre, in combination with ready opportunities to reconnect with people and to volunteer and take on responsibility, means that it provides a more effective means of

restoring a notion of citizenship to those who have been displaced from the mainstream activities of society.

“I think the unemployed situation has changed. I think there were people who decided they weren’t going to work and that was it you know. Whereas I think a lot of people who are unemployed now are unemployed because they couldn’t necessarily, as a, how to say it without sounding like I’m being really rude about, they can’t get, they can’t necessarily get work. So they’ve either got mental health problems that stops them getting their and so it’s like a physical, you know there’s, as opposed to just saying I’m not going to work, sod it, I’ll opt out the system because benefits were different then as well.” Participant 9, PWG staff

“..she’s been unemployed, as far as we can tell she’s never worked and she’s never going to work but I’m not going to say ‘Well you can’t volunteer here because you’re not moving on. You’ve been volunteering here for 10 years... because she’s not going to, it’s actually as much as she can do to be living that lifestyle for one...” Participant 16, PWG staff

“...moving people on is fine as long as they’ve got somewhere to move on to but I don’t see the centre just as a purely moving on place, it’s to provide people with the support that they need on an individual basis rather than just having an idea, which I don’t think anyone’s got, you know that people shouldn’t be here more than six months or six years or 16 years or whatever...” Participant 16, PWG staff

“we do have some people who are really difficult customers, who do have a specific need to be engaged with which goes beyond the problem that they have that want solved or want some help with, and so, and will just take up a lot of worker time just repeating and yeah, some people are just incredibly expert at that.” Participant 2, PWG Staff

For some people, they receive respite, safety, warmth and food. For others they get the chance to talk to other people, socialise and to interact at their own pace and in a manner that feels comfortable to them. The centre allows people a place to be, a place to reconnect at their pace and through activities like photography, art and yoga, that they may ►



Centre user feedback highlighted the kindness and warmth from the centre's staff and volunteers

- ▶ never have experienced in the past. The centre allows a platform for people to address the incredibly damaging and difficult experience of complete isolation that is experienced by so many people in the margins of society, who have struggled with poverty, unemployment and mental ill-health.

The ethos of the centre is such that these people are catered for and allowed to just 'be'. It is a place where people can come to be social, to be well and to be productive in a multitude of ways that are not recognised by a strict workfare agenda and its notions of citizenship.

An implicit acceptance that people have different needs and that they move at different paces is an antidote to previous paternalistic and corralling contact with impersonal institutions interested in pushing them into certain identities regardless of their histories, capabilities or readiness. The ethos of the centre, hands-on for those who are ready, and hands-off for those who are not, provides a context for people to relate to others in ways that don't feel forced or strained.

e) How do centre users understand this culture?

The staff were characterised not only as helpful but as actively reaching out to the people who came into the centre. Moreover there were a number of reflections on a more generic culture of kindness that was pervasive in the centre, a culture that is both unique and essential. The freedom to 'be' was complimented by experiences of kindness, caring and a sense of warmth.

"Pleasure really, and helpful. As I said a lot of staff are helpful here and if people didn't want to come they wouldn't come, would they?" Participant 6, centre user

"I have terrible depressions, always had, all my life, and really in my experience of many years of feeling pretty awful and marginalised I've never known a group of people to put their hands out, genuinely put their hands out and say "yeah, have a cup of tea, sit down". And in my case they saw responsibility as an earth for me so they said "the art group, come to the art group". Participant 8, volunteer

"I think what the workers here do is they inspire individuals with confidence, you know what I mean?" Participant 13, volunteer

"When this name change thing, it's been going on for a very long time, and to be able to envisage a new name you have to understand the function, which has never really been done and we really came to the conclusion it's that people care here, they really do care." Participant 6, volunteer

"There's an ethos of this centre and that's kindness and that word should be written large above this place. And that's what's being written out of the whole system, the DHSS had a lot of kindness, the mental health assessment on me, which I'd never had before, ...There's not that personal relationship, that's gone, the kindness has gone there ...this place stands for that old ethos, old is sad but it does seem to be, they're chipping away at it." Participant 8, volunteer

"...I don't know, I suppose maybe it's just the people that work in there, the genuine warmth of the place..." Participant 11, centre user



Participants said that the 'safe' space at the BUCFP improved their mental health

► f) The provision of a safe social space

From the earlier sections it is clear that the centre provides a number of essential functions for the local community. As well as providing crucial housing and benefits advice and low cost food, the staff and volunteers adhere to a flexible ethos that allows people to use the centre in a way that works for them. As a result they meet a wide variety of centre user needs.

Another key strand around which centre users organised their thoughts about the centre concerned what might loosely be called its 'socialising effect'. Particularly important is the impact that this socialising effect of the centre can have on people's wellbeing and specifically their mental health.

More than one interviewee from the paid workers' and trustee board specifically outlined that the centre was not a mental health project. Rather the centre regularly hosted a worker from Brighton & Hove Mind who organised drop-in sessions for people experiencing mental distress.

However, the accounts of many of the people who use the centre suggest that, while the centre has not been formulated with the intention of explicitly improving the mental health of centre users, it has, through numerous mechanisms, had a very significant impact in this area. Indeed if one is to adopt a social view of mental wellbeing that moves beyond clinical practice, the activities that take place at the centre can be viewed as directly relevant to centre users' wellbeing and mental health. This appeared particularly relevant because many people spoke of centre users living

lives characterised by isolation, often as a result of being out of work and suffering poor mental health

"...Because a lot of these people probably don't talk to many people, so it's good that they can come up here and chat, because otherwise they probably wouldn't talk to many." Participant 17, volunteer,

"Yes, I do think we reduce the isolation for a lot of people ...the whole idea being that what seems to be lost quite often in modern society is the whole idea of eating together, which is where you meet and you talk to people often, around the dinner table. That's gone, in lots of ways." Participant 5, PWG staff

"I think is because again obviously finances, housing, all those things can be poor or difficult or but that isolation and not having enough of a support network because I think so many people just, you know, especially being in Brighton because so many people have moved from other places to come here and then they get here and you know there's a lot of people that don't have that family network or a big circle of friends." Participant 1, mental health worker,

Rankin et al (2009) note that the poor are often vilified for having the wrong kind of identity and Hall & Cheston (2002) talk about the ways in which poor people can be made to feel different or apart from others because of certain experiences that they have. A majority of the centre users have experiences of mental health problems, many have experiences of the depredation, suffering and stigma of being unemployed or seeking welfare payments. For those who had lived with stigmatised identities, who had grown ►



I WAS QUITE YOUNG WHEN MY KIDS WERE BORN AND FINDING THIS PLACE I THINK MADE A MASSIVE DIFFERENCE TO MY STATE OF MIND AND MY EXPERIENCE OF THEIR EARLY CHILDHOOD ●●



...THEY'D SENT ME ALL THE DIFFERENT THINGS, YOU KNOW, SO IT WAS REAL, IT FELT VERY OVERWHELMING AT THE TIME AND I WAS VERY, VERY APPRECIATIVE OF HAVING SOMEONE WHO HAD A LOGISTICAL HEAD OR YOU KNOW, A LEGAL HEAD THAT COULD ACTUALLY LOOK THROUGH THAT AND DECIDE WHAT WAS, SORT THE WHEAT FROM THE CHAFF ●●

► used to being excluded from everyday economic and social life, who live a precarious existence and rely on an unsympathetic welfare system, the centre offered an alternative social world to the one that they had lived. It offers access to a social space where people's perception of them is not dominated by whether they work or not or whether they had been treated for mental health problems.

The open space and tea bar, where anyone can come along and have a cup of tea, rest, use the internet and/or socialise with others, is a central feature of what many people described as the beneficial properties of the centre. Indeed when asked why they currently use the centre, 81% agreed or strongly agreed that part of the reason was that it was the chance to talk to other people.

The benefits of previously isolated people being able to socialise with others are manifest and they include gaining personal recognition from others (Chunman & Wandersman, 1999). Specifically, many of the people who come to the centre are given space and, where appropriate, support to deal with their problems. Formal health policies often overlook the importance of being with other people in the development of a positive sense of self.

At the centre, the capacity of people to reconnect with their communities and for some to redefine their identities, skills and sense of self through being with others, undertaking health and creative classes like art and photography and through taking part in education classes at their own speed, was an essential part of what the centre offers to users. It was suggested by participants that such an environment is crucial for centre users to transition from feelings of hopelessness and despair to improved self-worth and capability.

"I think what a lot of people get out of it is the idea of meeting other people, possibly in the same positions that they are in, you know, and, also, everyone needs people to talk to. It doesn't matter who you are. Everyone wants someone to talk to... It's the idea that the burden's not just theirs, I think. They can share it. Because no one wants to feel they've got problems that no one else has. Everyone's got problems." Participant 17, volunteer,

"...if somebody needs help, sometimes it's really, the hardest thing is to go and ask for help, so you can come along here, you don't have to ask for help, you don't have to, you know, engage on that level but you're

getting support and help and acceptance and that friendly word and, a sort of, just somebody saying "how are you?" Participant 1, mental health worker,

"I think it gives people a sense of belonging, which is really important in fractured communities." Participant 3, Trustee

"I've often seen my role as sitting and listening to people and they know quite often there isn't, that they can't get the help they need, but they've been listed to, they've been heard... where people can come in and sit and have a cup of tea and be left all day." Participant 9, PWG staff

The sense of safety offered by the centre is central to its facilitative nature. 81% of centre users said that the ability to relax and feel safe was a key reason for them using the centre. Initially, the centre is little more than a safe refuge for people who may lack experiences of safety in their lives. For those seeking refuge from their own moods and thoughts, from violence, from poverty, from a numbing isolation or from pressure from various external agencies, the safety and openness of the centre is one of, if not the, only place that they can regularly visit and experience safety. Moreover it is a place where they can go and talk to people and make friends with other people in similar position as themselves.

Such a space may seem relatively banal and technically simplistic, but for many it is an essential first step to changing the way that they understand themselves and their capabilities. Moreover it is a platform very rarely present in more formal organisations that seek to change outcomes for the unemployed and unwell.

The centre provides a place for people to unconsciously work on themselves through the taken-for-granted activities of experiencing community, developing friendships and experiencing support and the many volunteering opportunities.

"The main area, yes. Although it is, it is, if I use a cheesy phrase, heart-warming sometimes to see people come in here who are feeling kind of totally useless, knocked back, hopeless, coming here, they're very suspicious, usually, quite often, and have a meal, a cup of coffee and sit down in the main area and find that people just don't hassle them, or occasionally come up and say something nice to them and offer them something, and they chat with someone." Participant 5, PWG staff ►

► “Yeah. Because it's rare for people, I think the centre users that come in here, that feeling of safety is something they don't get anywhere else, or it's rare for them to get it, which maybe is hard for funders to understand.” Participant 5, PWG staff

“Yeah it is a safe place, know what I mean? You know when you come here you know you can sit down. I'm a volunteer so I can get what I want, right? I'll sit down to a cup of tea and some member of staff will come up and talk to me.” Participant 6, centre user

“Well I think, I think it gives them a space, a safe space and I think it's, you can, you can come and be without having any stigma of being it's just a service for people with mental health problems because we don't, we're not that.” Participant 9, PWG staff

“Because I think it... because if you suffer from mental health and yeah, you know, either mental health issues myself, I think that they're all here for a reason as I was sort of explaining before, you know it's a nice, it's a friendly place, it's not intimidating. You're made to feel welcome and not judged, you're not pre-judged.” Participant 4, centre user

“Whereas here they can just come and sit and be left and left alone to just get on with it, which I think is valuable...” Participant 12, volunteer

“...so long as you don't step over the line in terms of offending other people, then you can be whatever you want to be and no one's going to pick on you here, no one's going to bully you, no one's going to force you to be something you don't want to be.” Participant 5, PWG staff

“...but I think beyond that it's a safe space in which people can develop social relations with other people.” Participant 2, PWG Staff

“...this kind of big cafe area it just works really well. I think people get, I think people get that kind of acceptance, I think everyone here is very accepting, I think loads of people that come here have their own stories, they've been through stuff so they're very accepting of other people.” Participant 1, mental health worker



g) The low cost meal

One of the key elements that places the centre in a strong position to challenge the experiences of social isolation and alienation that many users have experienced is the low cost meal.

In an instrumental sense the low cost meal is an essential service that can be the only regular meal that many centre users have during a given day and this makes it an incredibly important local provision. However the inherently social nature of communal eating is also very important as a natural vehicle with which to bring people together and this was a central feature of lunchtime at the centre. 49% centre of centre users agreed or strongly agreed that their social life had improved as a direct result of having used the centre.

Research shows people's lives change very significantly when they have people to spend time with (Davidson et al 2001) and lunchtime at the centre provides such a context. This is especially important in Brighton where the problem of isolation is particularly acute.

“...especially being in Brighton because so many people have moved from other places to come here and then they get here and you know there's a lot of people that don't have that family network or a big circle of friends.” Participant 1, mental health worker,

Participant 5, a worker at the centre, described how buying a cheap meal was ►

One of the functions of the BUCFP's daily vegan meal is to reduce social isolation and bring the community together



BECAUSE I THINK IT'S THAT THING ABOUT WHAT IMPACTS ON OUR MENTAL HEALTH AND ISOLATION IS A HUGE THING THAT IMPACTS ON MENTAL HEALTH AND THIS REDUCES ISOLATION, BEING DISEMPOWERED HAS A HUGE IMPACT ON MENTAL HEALTH AND THIS KIND OF GIVES PEOPLE THAT SPACE

► central in attracting people to the centre. Social eating at the centre was one of a number of mechanisms through which people were able to talk to other people, to build supportive networks and, for some people, to reduce loneliness and isolation.

"Yes, I do think we reduce the isolation for a lot of people... the whole idea being that what seems to be lost quite often in modern society is the whole idea of eating together, which is where you meet and you talk to people often, around the dinner table. That's gone, in lots of ways." Participant 5, PWG staff

"...but the food itself, the whole eating aspect of it, makes people talk." Participant 8, volunteer

"...obviously the dinner is a real central point, it's the heart of it almost in some ways to me, that people come together for that every single day and they come just at that point in the day and... to have their food, it's an absolute lifeline for a few people, absolutely lifeline for people who have no money, have no food, they can come in and get food, they have no money, they can come and be allowed to have a free... you know, it's a lifesaver for a few people." Participant 12, volunteer

h) The BUCFP: A centre for mental wellbeing?

As described in the earlier section, the people who come to use the centre experience a number of difficult problems. Particularly important is the fact that a majority of the centre users experience mental health problems.

The survey of users carried out in 2010 showed that of 104 respondents, 59% of respondents described themselves as having mental health issues. Indeed depression features particularly predominantly and this is very closely linked to people's experiences of social isolation and exclusion (Walker, 2008). These results were replicated this year. Hence even though it is accepted by staff and trustees that the centre is not a mental health centre, the accounts of interviewees suggest that mental wellbeing is a central issue in terms of the

way in which the centre operates. Indeed the questionnaire data showed that 52% of centre users agreed or strongly agreed that their mental health had improved as a direct result of their using the centre.

Users were asked to complete a retrospective 12 question General health Questionnaire pertaining to when they first came to the centre. They were also asked to complete the instrument for the present. The General Health Questionnaire provides a combined score based on questions regarding mental health, self-confidence, sleeplessness, decision making, enjoyment of day to day activities and feelings of self-worth.

Although such a measure is flawed in that it relies on retrospective accounts of personal wellbeing, some of which would be for a number of years ago, it does act as a proxy to try to get a feel for the process of change in terms of centre user's wellbeing. A Wilcoxon Signed ranks statistical test showed that there was a significant improvement in general health between the two time points ($Z=-3.694$, $p<.<0.000$).

Mental health professionals and employment rehabilitation professionals typically plan rehabilitation activities targeted to assist people to acquire and apply new skills and access the resources to live a meaningful life in the community (Lloyd et al 2008). The people that were interviewed provided a picture of a centre that offer these opportunities but implicitly rather than through a routinised plan of care and self-development. In so doing it provided a community platform for some of the centre users to move from alienation and lack of purpose to finding a sense of meaning through working with people experiencing circumstances and histories similar to theirs.

Centres like the BUCFP foster networks and opportunities for disadvantaged people in a way that statutory services find difficult; where an environment is provided that allows people to get help, information and community interaction without waiting behind a glass partition (Cigno, 1988), where they don't require to develop the identity of the 'helped' in order to access this.

"...because a lot of people, if you put in too many rules, people would start going just like that, because half the reason they're probably coming here is because they can't deal with rules, so it's, you want to be lax." Participant 17, volunteer,

"So if you can, if you can treat people like human beings and give them a bit of you know feeling like they're worth something rather ►





**...I DON'T KNOW, I SUPPOSE
MAYBE IT'S JUST THE PEOPLE THAT
WORK IN THERE, THE GENUINE
WARMTH OF THE PLACE...**

► than I think a lot of agencies turn up and say well that's it, you've only got an hour here, you have to go." Participant 9, PWG staff

Many people who come to the centre have been subject to repeated experiences of being negatively labelled by others around them and are passive recipients of interventions to improve their conduct in some way.

People don't generally tend to come to the centre to explicitly engage in projects to reconstruct their sense of self, their sense of self-worth and capacity to integrate in society. They will come to the centre to use a high class crèche, enjoy a low-cost meal, receive urgent advice to maintain their benefits or their home. Some might want to come to centre to get away from other people or to be around other people, to try something new by joining an art class or a computer or language class.

The reasons that draw people to the centre are wide and varied but very often they come to feel different about themselves. Through the centre they come to feel worthy of other peoples' attention and not due to their deficits but due to their capabilities, talents and status as a deserving person.

For some who use the centre, it provides a natural bridge between previous experiences of mental health and welfare dependency and what Mazzina (2006) calls the naturally occurring opportunities and rhythms of community life. 'Therapy' is typically constituted at the individual level as a process between a client who seeks to

change and a professional with the expertise to facilitate that change. However providing opportunities, support and a platform for people to discover new meanings for both themselves and the world around them also occurs through social contexts and in appropriate community arenas.

It was certainly the case that people talked about the reconstruction of the self that can occur at the centre. This occurred as a result of the provision of safe space, meeting people in similar situations through which they can empathise and build networks, a social meal that provides a context for social engagement, and through the more structured and formal volunteering opportunities so central to the development of self-worth and value.

Mazzina (2006) suggests that goals like social inclusion and community integration can only be provided by communities themselves rather than through the technical procedures of institutions that situate themselves on the periphery of these communities. It is for this reason that the BUCFP is able to facilitate changes in centre users' mental wellbeing.

"...anyone doing any course is going to improve wellbeing because it's that sense of achievement, all of those things where you're doing something that's stimulating your mind, you're taking your mind off what you might be worrying about, I think." Participant 1, mental health worker,

"To get, oh it's sort of peace and serenity in your mind, you come out, I mean apart from feeling sort of fitter as well, yeah it's really accessible.." Participant 11, centre user

"I just know how important it was to people I knew, to friends of mine at the time who were climbing the walls and there was somewhere to go and it's also great if you want to do the course, you know, whatever... on whatever level you're using it." Participant 12, volunteer

"OK, personally I get a very valuable sense of normality from coming here." Participant 13, volunteer

"I did change, yeah, so it was very good for me, yeah... it's just that I reconnected with the world, I... you know, and I got back to being myself eventually, it took six months, you know, I'd just have extreme anxiety when I was depressed, extreme, extreme anxiety and that carried on a little bit... I was being here, being busy doing other things, I wasn't ►



... I GET UP IN THE MORNING AND THE FIRST THING I THINK IS THAT TODAY I HAVE TO WORRY, BUT THE LEGAL ADVICE HERE HELPS THE ANXIETY. IT HAS A TREMENDOUS IMPACT ON MY HEALTH ●●

► in my head, at home on my own in my head.”
Participant 12, volunteer

“I think in some extreme cases having somewhere that is safe, warm, where you can get food, probably has a substantial initial benefit to people’s mental health because if you’re living rough or you’re in very poor accommodation or you’ve got no money, or you can’t manage money or you’ve got a substance problems or whatever, that’s already a massive like statement from the world..” Participant 2, PWG Staff

“....I get up in the morning and the first thing I think is that today I have to worry, but the legal advice here helps the anxiety. It has a tremendous impact on my health.”
Participant 4, centre user

“Well I think, I think it gives them a space, a safe space and I think it’s, you can, you can come and be without having any stigma of being it’s just a service for people with mental health problems because we don’t, we’re not that.” Participant 9, PWG staff

“Because I think it’s that thing about what impacts on our mental health and isolation is

a huge thing that impacts on mental health and this reduces isolation, being disempowered has a huge impact on mental health and this kind of gives people that space.” Participant 1, mental health worker,

“I have terrible depressions, always had, all my life, and really in my experience of many years of feeling pretty awful and marginalised I’ve never known a group of people to put their hands out, genuinely put their hands out and say “yeah, have a cup of tea, sit down”. And in my case they saw responsibility as an earth for me so they said “the art group, come to the art group”.” Participant 8, volunteer

“I actually got in the, sort of, suffering from depression, from being poor and, sort of, alienated, and so I can only, best example is to use myself. When I started coming here it changed my whole outlook on my situation, realising that “God, you can get involved, you can do this, you can do that” and going home thinking “Oh that was really, you know...” and that was, I, self-worth, you know, going home thinking “Oh, I made a little bit of a difference today” you know what I mean?”
Participant 3, Trustee ■

REFERENCES

- Bjarnason, T, & Sigurdardottir, TJ. (2003). Psychological distress during unemployment and beyond: social support and material deprivation among youth in six northern European countries. *Social Science & Medicine*, 56, 973-985.
- Braun, V, & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101.
- Brighton Unemployed Centre family Project. (2010). User survey findings.
- Cigno, K. (1988). Consumer views of a family centre drop-in. *Br. J. Social Wk.*, 18, 361-375.
- Chinman, MJ, Wandersman, A. (1999). The benefits and costs of volunteering in community organisations: review and practical implications. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 28(1), 46-64.
- Cohen, A. (2009). Welfare client's volunteering as a means of empowerment. *Non profit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 38(3), 522-534.
- Davidson, L, Stayner, DA, Nickou, C, & Styron, TH, Rowe, M, & Chinman, ML. (2001). 'Simply to be let in': Inclusion as a basis for recovery. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal*, 24(4), 375-388.
- Davis, GV. (2007). Pop-psychology and the spirit of capitalism: self-help, self work and the work ethic as Neo-liberal governmentality. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Western Political Science Association.
- Furnham, A, & Procter, E. (1989). Belief in a just world: review and critique of the individual difference literature. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 28, 365-384.
- Harper, D, (1991). The role of psychology in the analysis of poverty: some suggestions. *Psychology and Developing Societies*, 3(2), 193-201
- Hall, S, & Cheston, R. (2002). Mental health and identity: The evaluation of a drop in centre. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 12, 30-43.
- Institute for Volunteering Research. Unlocking the potential? Reviewing wildlife trusts' project to strengthen volunteering.
- Kilpatrick, S, Stirling, C, & Orpin P. (2010). Skill development for volunteering in rural communities. *Journal of Vocational Training and Education*, 62(2), 195-207.
- Llyod, C, Waghorn, G, & Williams, PL. (2008). Conceptualising recovery in mental health rehabilitation. *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 71(8), 321-328.
- Mellor, D, Hayashi, Y, Stokes, M, Firth, L, Lake, L, Staples, M, Chambers, S, & Cummins, R. (2009). Volunteering and its relationship with personal and neighbourhood well-being. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 38(1), 144-159.
- Mezzina, R, Davidson, L, Borg, M, Marin, I, Topor, A, Sells, D. (2006). The social natures of recovery: discussion and implications for practice. *American Journal of Psychiatric Rehabilitation*, 9, 63-80.
- Musick, MA, Wilson, J. (2003). Volunteering and depression: the role of psychological and social resources in different age groups. *Social Science & Medicine*, 56, 259-269.
- Ramm, C. (1998). A healthy living centre in the community. *Nursing Times*, 94(12).
- Rankin, D, Backett-milburn, K, & Platt, S. (2009). Practitioner perspectives on tackling health inequalities: findings from an evaluation of healthy living centres in scotland. *Social Science & Medicine*, 925-932.
- Sanders, J, & Munford, R. (2006). Community centre practice- potential and possibilities for creating change.
- Simmons, R. (2009). Entry to employment: discourses of inclusion and employability in work-based learning for young people. *Journal of Education & Work*, 22(2), 137-151.
- Stone, J. (2007). An Evaluation of Volunteer Opportunities Offered by the Brighton Unemployed Centre Family Project. University of Brighton.
- Theodore, N, & Peck, J. (1999). Welfare to work: national problems, local solutions. *Critical Social Policy*, 19, 485.
- Walker, C. (2008). *Depression and globalization*. Springer.
- Warren-Adamson, C. (2006). Research review: family centres: a review of the literature. *Child and Family Social Work*, 11, 171-182.