

HAVING SOMEONE TO TALK TO

FUNDED BY: Greets Green Partnership and the Big Lottery Fund.

PROJECT BACKGROUND: Sandwell Women's Agency Network (SWAN) has always offered advice and support for local women across a wide range of issues to promote social inclusion and break the cycle of isolation which can affect many. Issues may range from domestic violence and abuse to sexual health, teenage pregnancy, parenting, older age and eating well. Advice is provided through dedicated groups, workshops, training, information, practical advice or simply by providing a shoulder to cry on or a place for a friendly chat.

Now based at Wood Lane Community Centre, SWAN has been funded by Greets Green Partnership for the last five years, enabling it to become established and gain charitable status. That funding finished at the end of March 2008, and SWAN has subsequently been successful in achieving a major funding boost thanks to a Big Lottery grant which will provide £434,717 over three years.

The grant – from the Big Lottery Fund's 'Reaching Communities' pot – secures the future for SWAN. It's now funding a major new initiative called SWAN Community Carelink – a service which provides befriending and support for vulnerable people in their own homes.

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The SWAN Team (l to r): Elaine Knowles, Joint Manager, Sharon Askew, Support Worker, Sue Morgan, Joint Manager, Maxine Verschoyle, Admin/Support Worker, Sukhbir Panesar, Support Worker, Leanne Phillips, Support Worker and Stefan Askew, Support Worker.



Sukhbir Panesar, Support Worker.

PROJECT DETAILS: The SWAN Community Carelink project aims to provide support at home to help people maintain their independence and dignity, and improve their mental health, wellbeing and quality of life.

The service was launched on 1st April 2008 and is for any men and women who are vulnerable - whether because of disability, mental health issues or domestic violence, for example, or because they are elderly or housebound. Volunteers are the cornerstone of the project and are recruited and trained to enable them to provide a one-to-one

support and befriending service across Greets Green and Sandwell. The aim is to recruit and train more than 50 volunteers over the three year period.

Their work includes chaperoning people to the doctors, solicitors, or Citizens Advice Bureau, or helping with practical issues such as shopping. They can also signpost people to other services which can help. And of course they're available to listen.

"Friendship and company are always on hand at SWAN," says a current service user. "Without the understanding staff I don't know where I'd have been." Another adds: "The staff have been so kind and considerate in helping me to overcome my problems and, most of all, for making me feel so welcome."

The project is filling a gap in services for vulnerable people whilst also enhancing the skills and employability of those working as local volunteers.

ACHIEVEMENTS: During its first six months, SWAN Community Carelink has been inundated with referrals, demonstrating a clear need for its work. Joint Manager, Elaine Knowles, says: "We've got lots of volunteers and have been very busy taking a lot of referrals. We're currently supporting around 400 individuals.

"We've been inundated because I think we identified a true gap in service provision. There was no-one out there supporting vulnerable people in their own homes. A lot of people find it hard to access services because they have a physical disability or a mental health problem. We're being more proactive and taking a service direct to them."

The service has around 10 active volunteers and more on a database who can be called upon when needed, plus two counsellors for one-to-one work with clients. The work of SWAN Community Carelink is not only having an impact on the individuals who are benefiting from its work, but also on partner organisations such as the NHS, Anchor and Aquarius.



By taking referrals from mental health professionals at Hallam Street (adult in-patients) and Edward Street (old age psychiatry) hospitals, and from the Community Mental Health Team, SWAN's work is helping to prevent bed blocking by assisting with discharges.

It's also helping to prevent re-admissions, by providing extra support to patients in the community. "I know if I have a worry I can come to SWAN and they will help me to sort it out," explains a service user. "The staff are providing a service that is needed by all the community."

PROJECT IN ACTION: SWAN Community Carelink's work includes supporting the memory disorder nurses and psychiatric community nurses who might visit someone at home monthly, but are unable to offer the weekly support which can be vital.

"That's where we step in," says Sue Morgan, Joint Manager. "We're also getting referrals from Anchor and Aquarius and are able to support them as well. If someone's on a detox programme, we can go in weekly and support that person to help them come off drink or drugs."

The project's work is wide ranging. It can also help with domestic violence cases and, by offering support at home, can gain a better insight into what help is needed. Other referrals have included individuals seeking support with diverse issues including debt, housing, form filling, mobility, anxiety and depression, and isolation.

As Sue explains: "The project includes the little old lady who will phone and say 'I want someone to come and play cards with me'. One worker goes out and plays cards with her once a week and is the only person she ever sees. If they don't feel like cards, they bake a cake together instead. It can be something as simple as that and it makes all the difference."

Santock Douli, Principal Social Worker with the Primary Care Liaison Team, Sandwell Mental Health and Social Care Trust, explains: "There's been a huge unmet need that's being met at last thanks to this new service. A lot of our clients either live on their own, have no family or have lost someone and don't know where to turn. SWAN Community Carelink provides them with some human contact.



Stefan Askew, Support Worker.

"We deal with a lot of ordinary people who have maybe lost a loved one or their job or have financial problems. They may suffer flashbacks to a road traffic accident – which is a common mental health problem – and this new service provides that extra bit of support that can make all the difference. It helps them



to re-engage with society, empowers them with confidence and knowledge, and helps to prevent people becoming more seriously ill. All the people we've had feedback from have found SWAN Community Carelink really invaluable."

One service user says: "As a person who has experienced mental health problems due to reactions to bereavement, I have had the good fortune of being introduced to SWAN and have never looked back.

"Being with ladies of my own age and experiences has been a great 'leveller' to my own personal problems and life's challenges are not so awesome. A problem shared is a problem bared."

FACTS AND FIGURES: During the first six months, figures show a total of 758 individuals have accessed the services offered by SWAN Community Carelink. They have received, or are receiving, the following support:

● Group support/self referral	526	● Isolation	51
● Domestic abuse	28	● Bereavement support	16
● Mental health	48	● Form filling	2
● Career advice	3	● Mobility	3
● Anxiety and depression	48	● Stroke	2
● Pensions	3	● Memory disorder	2
● Rape/sexual abuse	2	● Dementia	3
● Housing	6	● Debt	1
● Alcohol abuse	14		

CONTACT: To find out more about SWAN Community Carelink, call Joint Managers, Elaine Knowles or Sue Morgan at SWAN on 0121 553 7074, or email swanlink@live.com

Greets Green Partnership was awarded £56 million in 2000 to deliver a 10 year regeneration programme under the Government's New Deal for Communities (NDC) initiative. It has funded over 340 projects throughout the area, covering community services, crime & community safety, health, housing & urban form and jobs & skills. The Partnership area, which is adjacent to West Bromwich Town Centre, is home to just over 12,400 residents living in 4,900 households.

For permission to publish this case study and to request photographs, please call Brian McKinstrie, Greets Green Partnership's Communications & PR Manager on freephone 0800 953 0215 or email brian_mckinstrie@sandwell.gov.uk



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