

# RESEARCH BRIEFING

## AN EVALUATION OF THE ASSIST TRUST, NORWICH: A VOLUNTARY SERVICE FOR ADULTS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES



# AN EVALUATION OF THE ASSIST TRUST, NORWICH: A VOLUNTARY SERVICE FOR ADULTS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

**DECEMBER 2014 – MARCH 2015**

**PROJECT TEAM** Dr Penny Sorensen, Sue Bailey and Dr Pippa Belderson

**FUNDER** The Assist Trust, Norwich

## WHY IS THIS STUDY IMPORTANT

Community based services for adults with intellectual disabilities have been a key feature of government policy since the shift away from care and support provided in residential institutions. However, day centres for adults with intellectual disabilities are often viewed as underperforming, although there is very little evidence of evaluations of such services. Criticisms are that some services may just keep people occupied, and provide respite for carers, but offer little else. In contrast, services that are able to provide a wider range of activities and more integrated and diverse settings are more likely to enable people to form relationships with their communities.

The Assist Trust is a community based service located in Norwich that aims to provide a very wide range of groups and activities for members, for example, socialising and discussion groups, daily living skills workshops, and housing options advice, from both of its two main bases and out in the community. This study sheds some light on how staff and members experience community based service for adults with intellectual difficulties, and draws out messages about how day services can achieve a more meaningful and participative model of delivery.

## AIMS OF THE STUDY

The aim of the evaluation was to provide a deeper understanding of the work at Assist. The research explored what elements of the service appear to make a difference to members' lives, as well as the barriers and opportunities encountered. The research questions included:

- How is the service at Assist experienced by members?
  - What do members enjoy about attending?
  - Which groups and activities do they participate in?
  - How do they mix with other members and staff?
  - How involved are they in the service design and provision?
- How do members of staff understand the ethos of the organisation?
  - How do they put their understanding into practice?
  - What does it feel like to work at Assist?

In addition to the above research questions, the researchers designed two questionnaire for future use by Assist Trust staff to explore how the service is experienced by carers and to find out why some members stop using the service.

## HOW WAS THE STUDY DONE?

The evaluation took place over four months between December 2014 and March 2015. The methodology included:

- Photo-elicitation interviews with members – ten members (6 males and 4 females) took photographs for up to two weeks, documenting their time at Assist and the activities

they participated in. The photographs were used in the interviews to encourage talk and allowed participants to reflect on their day-to-day lives and relationships.

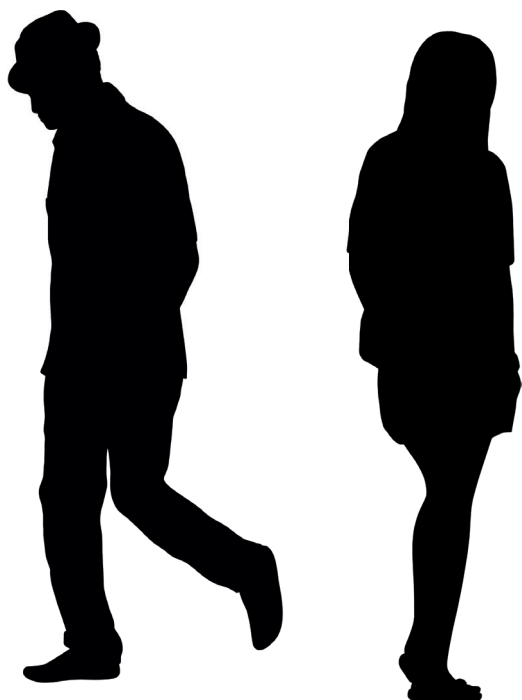
- Questionnaires for members of staff – all 28 staff completed the questionnaire. A staff background information form was given separately and 20 were returned.
- Observation of activities at both sites – to explore the interaction between staff and members.
- Information from the Assist database – gender, age, length of time at Assist, travel arrangements, and frequency of attendance was explored through an Excel spreadsheet provided by Assist.

All data from interviews and some data from the staff questionnaires were analysed using thematic qualitative analysis. This 'bottom up' approach allowed themes to emerge from the data and provided new and detailed insight into the lives of members at Assist as well as the work of staff. Quantitative analysis was also undertaken of data from the Assist database and background information form to produce descriptive statistics.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Slightly more males (57%) attend Assist compared to females (43%). There was a wide range of ages and the average was 33 years. Eighty percent of members had attended for ten years or less and 20% had attended Assist for ten years or longer. Roughly half of the 136 members lived within the ring road in Norwich with 63 members living further out of the city and other areas of the county.
- Members attached importance to the opportunities for social participation offered at Assist. Friendship and romantic relationships were important factors in attending. Participants spoke about their lives before they became involved in Assist as boring and lonely.
- Travel training and work placements increased independence and allowed for a more fulfilling life.
- Group activities were mostly seen as enjoyable and members were able to choose what they wanted to participate in, in collaboration with staff, to suit their needs. Activities that happened outside Assist were popular and often involved exploring the wider community.
- Most members (60%) travelled to the centre by taxi. For the other 40%, being able to travel independently by public transport could reduce the choice of groups as members would arrive later than the start time of many groups.
- The Assist Trust staff team was diverse and demonstrated a wealth of relevant personal and work experience. Members saw staff and managers as approachable.

- Members were encouraged to become involved in the planning and development of the service through the members committee, newsletter, groups, and individual sessions with their key workers. A newly developed assessment and support tool, giving a clear visual representation of members' progress, had helped individual voices to be heard. Members with poor communication skills were supported to express themselves.
- Staff were clear about the ethos of Assist and purpose of the groups as a way of promoting choice and decision-making, taking responsibility and getting on with others. Key workers stressed the importance of knowing members well, including their lives outside Assist, so that they could be catered for in the best possible way.
- On the whole, staff were satisfied with their pay and conditions, appreciated the training on offer, and felt well supported by colleagues. A few said they would like more supervision and feedback on their work and some said they were unhappy about recent changes to the sickness policy. Recent positive changes included the assessment and support tool, the appointment of an in-house social worker and other new staff, and the opening of the Norman Café – which gives members work experience.



## KEY & RECOMMENDATION FOR POLICY & PRACTICE

- Services that function more like a community, rather than a 'them and us' set-up, can be achieved through mutual respect and good communication. Staff at Assist worked hard to do this by focusing on the needs of members through engaging in continuous consultation with them.
- Service providers need to ensure that members have real choice in what activities and groups they participate in. For example, in this evaluation, the researchers suggested that activities at Assist could run for shorter durations so that members did not have to persist with an activity that they did not enjoy for months at a time. Paradoxically, those members who had become more independent and were using off-peak travel often arrived late and missed the start of the activities. Service providers need to consider these limitations when organising activities.
- Key worker relationships need to be strong and members need to be clear on who they need to go to for help.
- Employment skills workshops need to make sure that members are equipped to succeed in 'real' work. Services like Assist need to increase links with employers in the local community but could also explore commercial and self-employment opportunities based on the skills and interests of the members.
- Further use of community spaces might increase the visibility of services such as Assist, helping to create the potential for links with future employers.

## STRENGTHS & LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

### Strengths

This project used innovative photo-elicitation methods to enable members with communication difficulties to participate in the research. It gave a good insight into the experience members had of the service. The project triangulated data from staff (all of whom took part), members, and member records to build up a picture of the service from a number of perspectives. The UEA research team was independent from the Assist Trust.

### Limitations

The 10 members who took part may not represent the views of all who use the service. Study sample size was small and the evaluation was of a particular service commissioned by the service itself.

## FIND OUT MORE

Dr Penny Sorensen | [p.sorensen@uea.ac.uk](mailto:p.sorensen@uea.ac.uk)

**CENTRE FOR RESEARCH ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**

School of Social Work, Faculty of Social Sciences, Elizabeth Fry Building,  
University of East Anglia, Norwich Research Park, Norwich NR4 7TJ

**DIRECTOR** Professor Marian Brandon