

# **The Balance of Power**

## **The Mustard Tree, Ancoats, Manchester**

### **Introduction**

The lives of people on the margins of society are characterised by complex circumstances and their health outcomes are some of the country's worst. They frequently cope with multiple issues such as mental and physical health problems, substance misuse, criminal convictions and homelessness.

Public services respond to a clearly defined problem, with a specific remit, meaning that the complexities of vulnerable people's lives often place them out of reach of these services.

In order to reach vulnerable clients, an approach that goes beyond a narrow needs-based solution is required; the power balance upon which traditional service models are based must be redefined. How can vulnerable people be realistically empowered to help themselves, with real opportunities to improve health outcomes?

### **Origins of the project**

The Mustard Tree was launched by Dave and Shona Smith in Ancoats, a deprived area of North Manchester. The charity reaches 4,500 clients from all walks of life, including refugees and asylum seekers; families experience financial, physical or emotional destitution; and those suffering from low-self-esteem or addiction.

The organisation provides free clothing and household goods to vulnerable people across Greater Manchester – but its most significant role is getting people back on their feet and on constructive pathways into society, thereby vastly improving health outcomes.

The Mustard Tree works in extremely challenging circumstances. The life expectancy of a person experiencing homelessness is a staggering 30 years less than the general population, according to a 2011 report by Crisis. A homeless person is more likely to take their own life than the rest of society, and many have acute or multiple health needs; drug and alcohol misuse accounts for a third of all deaths.

### **Partnership working**

The charity has established several long-term partnerships, including with the Red Cross. In 2004 it launched the Boaz Trust to develop programmes and workshops, and also created a spin-off organisation to generate income and offer work and volunteering opportunities for clients.

Partnerships with statutory, business, and third sector communities – while gaining the trust of commissioners, clients and colleagues – have been key to improving sustainability and protecting The Mustard Tree's long-term future.

### **Approach and delivery**

The Mustard Tree intentionally but informally tackles clients' isolation by encouraging people to sit together at meals and work alongside each other as volunteers. A sense of belonging is cultivated through presenting the charity as a safe, secure and non-

judgemental space. At the heart of their approach is the conviction that everyone deserves to be treated with respect and dignity, regardless of their social status or background.

Some simple skills have been developed among The Mustard Tree's staff and volunteers which help to bring about a strong feeling of community. People have a genuine knack for striking up a conversation and taking a genuine interest in what clients have to say. Workers take every opportunity to forge new relationships and build trust.

By creating an environment in which volunteering and reciprocity is strongly encouraged, The Mustard Tree has reframed the traditional beneficiary and benefactor relationship. It has made a concerted effort to remove the stigma associated with needing help, encouraging clients to take responsibility for their lives and health.

These informal stages – creating a safe place, fostering a sense of belonging, reframing key relationships and offering meaningful activity – help The Mustard Tree go far beyond simply handing out provisions, but support people to meaningfully progress in their lives.

### **Success and outcomes**

The Mustard Tree has seen a proliferation of diverse client-focused programmes of care and support. There is a strong emphasis on counselling and mentoring alongside other health schemes like fitness, dance, free weights and healthy living classes.

Volunteering within the project allows clients to engage in meaningful roles, opening the door to training and paid employment opportunities. Projects run by the charity include work placement, volunteering and training. The organisation has been successful in brokering relationships with Business in the Community, social enterprises and other commercial businesses which provide opportunities for clients to learn new skills, develop routines and strategies to cope with problems on their own.

### **Future plans and obstacles**

The Mustard Tree recognises that while ensuring provision for vulnerable people is essential, efforts must be directed to long-term solutions. This means continually shifting people's gaze from the charity's crisis intervention onto sustainable support and development. If Mustard Tree's crisis referral rate were to drop it would allow the organisation to develop the skills and capacity to handle crisis in a more holistic way and support its aspiration of progression and independence for clients.

### **Conclusion**

The Mustard Tree offers homeless and vulnerable people a unique and personalised approach to the complex and challenging everyday problems they face. This includes support that goes beyond a crisis response. Crucially the charity achieves this by giving people the opportunity to learn new skills, improve their health and wellbeing, find employment and develop the confidence to achieve their goals and transform their lives. This holistic approach has great potential to improve the health outcomes of vulnerable people.

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