Friendship Club, January 2014

“It’s changing people’s lives”
History

The Friendship Club is part of Dorset People First, a user led charity supporting adults with learning disabilities to speak up and lead change.

The Friendship Club began in 2008 following a pilot project funded by the Dorset Partnership Board Learning Disability Development Fund to find out what could be done to support adults with learning disabilities form relationships. Most adults with learning disabilities reported feeling socially isolated and unsafe in the community. They told us they wanted to do everyday things like everyone else in society - to be accepted, feel safe and to make and meet friends in pubs, cafes and other community places. Support was needed to organise opportunities for this to happen.

Monthly events started from September 2008 in Bridport, Weymouth and Dorchester. Venues were chosen which felt safe, friendly, were unlikely to be busy and had good disabled access. By December 2008 over 150 adults had attended, a user led Steering Group had been formed and demand was growing in other areas of the county. More funding enabled the club to expand into North and East Dorset. By 2010 numbers stood at 400 and £287,000 of Big Lottery funding was secured to continue and develop the Friendship Club. This funding ended at the end of 2013. Interim funding from Dorset County Council has been secured until the end of March 2014.

An average of 150 events take place annually in 12 towns across Dorset and approximately 500 members meet regularly with over 750 people with learning disabilities having attended at least once. Co-ordinators signpost members to other activities and groups in the community.

The Friendship Club successfully addresses key issues affecting its members including social isolation, health and wellbeing, confidence, independence, safety, hate crime and public perceptions of learning disability. Our vision is that all people with learning disabilities will lead a fulfilling life within their community which embraces and supports them.

The Friendship Club is user led (i.e. it is led by its members) and has grown organically. It is open to all adults with a learning disability.

Benefits

The Friendship Club is a user led, person centred club providing opportunities for friendship in the community. Benefits include members reporting:-
- reduced social isolation, improved health and wellbeing, feeling more confident and independent,
- having real, peer group friends, feeling safer as well as more included in their local community.

The use of mainstream venues is key and as a result we have observed a noticeably positive change in public perceptions of learning disability.

Offering

1. **Evening events** – based on current figures, at least 160 per annum.
2. **Development of service** – bids to grant making bodies for development, including daytime activities.
3. **Employment** – co-ordinators, including member of staff with a learning disability.
4. **Steering Groups** – help steer club, run activities, attend events and meetings.
5. **Signposting** – to other relevant community based events.
6. **Signposting to support** – to professional support, including attending follow up meetings.
7. **Partnerships** – continuing with and increasing partnerships with other organisations, charities, providers and businesses particularly better joint working between sectors. Deliver more for less.
8. **Volunteers** – around 60 help run the club, to continue to support them and develop this offering.

9. **Friendship Club presence** – at learning disability events i.e. LDPB Away Day, national and local events.

10. **Independent Friendships** – supporting members to meet up with friends outside of events.

11. **Help Place / ICE Scheme** – develop scheme county wide, deliver workshops and ICE cards. Continued partnership working with police. Opportunities to expand and include older people and children.

12. **Literature** – Friendship Club literature widely available, including easy read diary of activities.

13. **Employment** – builds skills and supports individuals into employment

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**Current situation**

Big Lottery funding ended at the end of December 2013. We are currently working on some more short term solutions and will reapply to the Big Lottery but there are no guarantees.

In the environment outlined above, the Friendship Club has little option but to cease April 2014 with the likely following impacts:-

- increased social isolation of members leading to higher dependency on other services (i.e. depression)
- opportunities for integration into community and facilities greatly reduced
- reduced respite for carers
- lobbying campaign from carers and members in press and media
- reduced opportunities to gain skills, confidence and independence which can lead to employment
- less opportunities to promote, encourage and support physical and emotional health and wellbeing
- fewer opportunities to pick up problems early in individuals and signpost to preventative support.

**Discussion**

A recent study has shown that social isolation is as bad for your health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. We know that stronger social capital is linked to better health and positive social outcomes. There is considerable evidence suggesting people with learning disabilities have fewer opportunities for friendships, are socially isolated, victims of hate crime and have poorer wellbeing than the majority of the population.

Friendships can take time for the best of us to develop and sustain, but in particular for people with learning disabilities. Are we addressing this inequality and supporting individuals to develop and sustain social networks?

The Friendship Club is a leader and trailblazer in Dorset and nationally as it has started to address these core issues. The Peer Challenge Team praised Dorset County Council in 2013 for this excellent project and were impressed by the ‘huge commitment of staff and councillors to provide excellent services for people with a learning disability’. As far as we know, there is nothing else on this scale in the UK.

The Friendship Club is a strong candidate to apply for additional funding from other grant making bodies to grow and expand, to develop its offering of value for money projects which people want and where there is an identified need.

If the Friendship Club were no longer able to operate we could conclude that the evidence suggest the impact would be extremely negative in the lives of members and furthermore it might be reasonable to assume that this may result in greater costs to the state in terms of knock on impact and increased additional dependence on support services i.e. GP’s, health, carers support.
Feedback from Professionals and Carers

75% of professionals believe the Club is effective in reducing the need for statutory support

86% of carers/professionals indicate members are learning skills around social interaction

100% of professionals/carers say Club achieves opportunities for friendship and integration

67% of professionals/81% carers say Club helps members feel confident with good life skills

91% of carers/professionals say members feel safer now when out in the community

90% of carers/professionals indicate members are integrating more into the wider community

68% of carers feel the Club has made a difference to their caring role

87% of members say they have made friends at the Friendship Club

67% of professionals indicate Club helps members stay healthy both in mind and body

Feedback from Members

97% of members have met friends through the Friendship Club

69% of members feel less isolated or lonely since they came to the Friendship Club

96% of members feel more part of their community as a result of coming to the Friendship Club

77% of members think the Friendship Club has improved their physical health

96% of members think the Friendship Club has helped improved their wellbeing i.e. they feel less depressed or happier

85% of members think the Friendship Club has helped them make healthier choices i.e. walking/dancing more choosing healthier options when out to eat or drink

92% of members feel safer going out in the community as a result of the Friendship Club.