



Eva Harvey describes how Phoenix Futures has piloted therapeutic communities training for its staff, and extends an open invitation to commissioners

# Therapeutic futures

**At Phoenix Futures we take pride in our ability to support service users at every stage of their recovery.**

Our adult residential rehabilitation services run a therapeutic community (TC) programme, and following the evaluation of previous 'understanding therapeutic communities' training, we have gone on to pilot some groundbreaking training for staff working in TCs in both prisons and residential settings. A working group was established to discuss how best to develop training for all new staff working in TCs, and last July a very realistic, experiential TC training package was developed by senior operational managers, the head of operations for prisons and the service manager for Sheffield Adult Residential Service.

The five-day package was designed to be run in an actual residential service setting, with training split into two halves – mornings consisted of formal training looking at the theoretical aspect of TCs, while afternoons were reserved for putting the theory into practice, with participants becoming residents and living as part of the community. Although they did not stay in the residential service – as beds were needed for service users – they did experience all of the daytime routine and had to keep development logs and journals to demonstrate how they could put the theories and methods into practice.

So that new staff in all our residential services could take advantage, it was agreed that service managers would be best placed to deliver the training. Sheffield Adult Residential Service became the pilot, with the first course run during last September by service manager Claire Groves and treatment manager at HMP Garth TC, Lyndsey Hague. I attended the training along with eight other Phoenix Futures staff members, including four from the actual service.

The programme has four stages – induction, primary, senior and re-entry. The induction stage is the settling-in stage where residents can expect a high level of support from both other residents and staff while they familiarise themselves with the programme, structure, house routines and rules. The primary and senior stages are where the real work begins, as residents concentrate on personal development, self-awareness and identifying the underlying issues that play a role in dependency.

Using a comprehensive programme of groups, workshops, seminars, community meetings and key work, the re-entry stage focuses on supporting the individual to take the first steps toward integration into the wider community, with re-entry accommodation provided off-site.

As soon as we arrived on the Monday, participants were treated as 'new inductions' and assigned jobs with other members of the community – kitchens, maintenance, gardens and front desk. The first day was a bit nerve-racking and confusing, as we had to learn the terminology and rules, including reporting to

the front desk.

We all had a chance at facilitating the morning meetings, but each group opted to do different activities – they participated in groups, sat in on a 'life story' from one of the residents and even had a 'mock' encounter. An encounter group is a form of psychotherapy in which a small group engages in intensive interactions to increase self-awareness and improve interpersonal relations, with group members encouraged to be completely honest and open.

All nine participants learned about the TC principles in the most realistic way. By Thursday we had moved to the primary stage of the programme and were given more responsibility. Some even got 'pull ups' – written slips from other residents unhappy about aspects of their behaviour within the community. By Friday we were veterans of the community and became seniors, even participating in our own graduation ceremony.

The success of this pilot means we can now implement the programme as part of the induction of all our staff in prison and residential settings, allowing first hand experience of how the TC model works in practice. Nicola Owens from HMP Wymott described the training as 'an overwhelming, emotional but fantastic rollercoaster of personal discovery, as well as a far greater understanding of a TC than I ever could have anticipated'.

For myself, it was the most groundbreaking experience of training I have ever had. I learnt more in that week than I have in my ten years in the field – not only about TCs but also about how our service users feel about entering residential treatment on an emotional level. It's a very humbling experience and I think it would be great for commissioners to experience this for themselves – they would certainly get a better understanding of what we do, what our services offer and how sometimes six months' funding may not be enough.

Every person entering treatment is different, as are their needs – where one may be ready to go into resettlement, others may need longer. By understanding service user needs on a realistic level such as this, commissioners would be able to see that funding needs to be allocated on an individual basis.

It was an amazing experience and I know it will certainly improve the practice of our staff, including my own. We would certainly welcome any commissioners that would like to experience this training, and I'd also like to thank all at Sheffield Adult Residential Service for making us feel so welcome – the experience was all the greater for your support.

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*Pictured above: Eva Harvey (front) with the other training participants.*