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Serendipity Social Group Project

Serendipity groups are social groups for adults with high functioning autism or Asperger syndrome who are at risk of being socially excluded or isolated. The groups are based on non-prescriptive activities and meet with a facilitator (neurotypical or person with autism) and work together to look for common interests and focus for their Serendipity group. All organisation and implementation is managed by people with autism allowing them to be in control of their leisure and social time rather than their peers.

Our Serendipity project started after extensive consultations with the local Hampshire wide autism community proved a huge need for more social groups for people with high functioning autism and Asperger syndrome. Given the urgency and importance realised, Autism Hampshire secured funding for this project from the Three Guineas Trust, Hampshire County Council, Lynne Foundation, Colfax Trust and Hampshire Autism Partnership Board. A Project Coordinator Jamie Pratt was recruited to support the management of this project.

The project was developed initially by running 2 pilot groups and today we have 11 groups in operation with an aim to increase to 15 over the coming months. The first 2 groups started at Portsmouth University (where we have a student mentoring service) and another in the nearby town of Fareham. The groups are facilitated by Autism Hampshire but led by a person with autism chairing and running the groups. They are well attended and valued amongst attendees.

People with autism have been involved right from the start of the project, from its design stage to now being on the steering group which oversees the project. For those who volunteer to lead a group, training has commenced on 'how to run a successful group'. Currently we are organising a celebration event to share good practice which will help to introduce the groups to meet each other.

Moving the project forward with local communities

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Key to our success has been to find venues within the community that can be used for free or at a low cost. Therefore groups are working in partnership with other organisations in order to secure a venue that will be sustainable long term. We have groups that meet in a theatre, a disability charity, mental health charity, a community café, a library and even a pub. Other agencies have helped by advertising for volunteers, engaging people with autism to attend the groups and for sourcing new meeting venues.

A key issue has been facilitating groups in areas where there is a need but we are yet to acquire volunteers to support the groups. Two volunteers are needed to start a group, therefore we are currently marketing to engage communities to [find these volunteers](#).

Once engaged, volunteers themselves encourage others to attend and make the group their own by using their ideas which ensures a person centred approach. Volunteers and attendees are also encouraged to engage in the wider Serendipity network/steering group.

Outcomes Achieved to Date

- Recruiting volunteers who might have been lacking confidence to then go on to be eager to do more volunteering and get involved in their local community
- People attending groups when they may not have attended any outside activity before
- Groups and friendships formed because of access to the groups/project; example - a singing group that raises autism awareness have become friends that meet on a regular basis who previously didn't know each other.
- 30+ volunteer enquiries resulting in more than 10 people recruited as volunteers

Future developments

- To have at least 15 social groups set up Hampshire wide and Isle of Wight by the end of next year 2016
- We will further provide project specific training for the volunteers.
- We have plans for a celebration event in February 2016 and continued development of the steering group with aims of looking at the sustainability/funding of the project after the initial funds have ended

Groups running to date:

Andover
Basingstoke
Eastleigh
Fareham (evening)
Gosport

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Highlands Hub (day event Fareham)
Mayflower (Southampton)
Portsmouth
Swanmore
Whiteley
Singing Spectrum (Fareham, sing all over Hampshire)