

Fresh Start

**Evaluation
Summary 2025**

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project 

Since 2018, Project 6's Fresh Start service has been supporting mothers in Sheffield who have had their children removed from their care. These women represent some of the most stigmatised people in our community. They are often an afterthought in decision making and their needs overlooked.

In 2023 we commissioned a team of researchers from Sheffield Hallam University to evaluate the service. They looked at the activities Fresh Start provides, the unmet needs it supports and, most importantly, the experiences of the women involved.

key findings

the impact of loss

Recognition of the impact on the mental health of mothers when their children have been removed is hugely significant; feelings of suicidality are not uncommon. Fresh Start provides specific support around mother's loss, validating and legitimising the grief that comes with child removal.

rebuilding trust

Referrals to Fresh Start come predominantly through Social Care. Given the difficult nature of care proceedings, mothers understandably often have a distinct lack of trust in professionals when they first come to us. This can create a barrier from the outset. The evaluation recognised that women often reported feeling referrals were something that was done to them, rather than with or for them. When we begin working with women we need to show them they can trust us. This means being reliable, not giving up when things get difficult, and when we say we're going to do something, we do it.

the power of peers

The evaluation highlighted the integral part peer support plays in the project. Whilst the group environment can be seen as intimidating to begin with, common experiences shared by the mothers and the understanding and empathy this brings is a powerful element in the process of self-acceptance. This is seen clearly whilst women are engaging in positive activities.

open to all

The demographics of those accessing our service are not representative of the wider city. Working with the local authority we want to better understand if this is reflective of people under social care in Sheffield. Where underrepresentation exists, either through challenges in the referral process, awareness of services, or cultural and systemic barriers to accessing support, we want to explore new ways to ensure everyone has access to the right support for them.

developing new skills

The evaluation found that engaging in education increased the social capital of the women. Fresh Start works to build independence and coping strategies, and whilst we will support and advocate around any necessary practical help, we empower the women to begin to do this for themselves too. Evidence shows us that this model reduced re-occurrences of child removals as well as numbers of mothers who have experienced child removal presenting at mental health services.

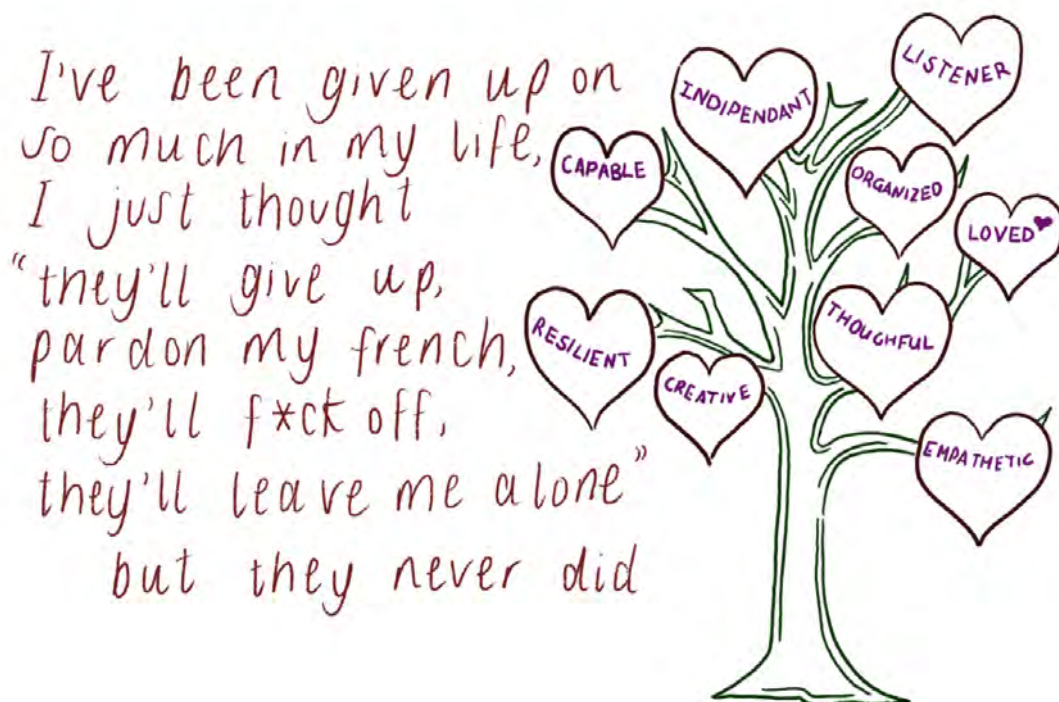
Since the evaluation began in 2023, we have already made significant changes to the service offer not captured in the final report.

Fresh Start utilises a model of support, education and empowerment. A key difference to other similar services in the country is that Fresh Start has no requirement mandating the use of contraception to participate. This important principle ensures women have a genuine choice when they decide to start working with us. 83% of women supported by the service felt they now had an increased understanding and acceptance of their experiences and 100% reported an increase in connection to their community.

At the point of referral, we begin working alongside the individual to agree what Fresh Start should look like for them. Whilst we provide direct support with some practical tasks, our aim is always to move to a place where they feel they have the skills and confidence to no longer need us. Within the last two years we have embedded a successful progression pathway, including a structured development program, 'She Learns, She Grows'. In 2024 Fresh Start delivered 64 sessions focused on education and learning.

Volunteering is a key part of other Project 6 services, and it was important to be able to provide similar opportunities within Fresh Start. Those working with the service have gone on to volunteer within Project 6 as well as with other organisations in the city. This year, two women supported by Fresh Start successfully completed the Ambassador Scheme with Likewise, a 6-month course that equips people with the skills and experience to move on to professional roles in the social care sector.

Fresh Start is currently working in partnership with Sheffield Hallam Social Work department. The team contribute to lectures and provide social work placements. As the evaluation states, education that destigmatises and challenges biases at this stage of training, better equips future social workers to provide more effective and compassionate support throughout their careers.



next steps

Project 6 have four key recommendations in addition to those already raised and actioned from the evaluation. We believe this would allow the service to better meet the needs of those we work with.

more investment

Increased investment in the service would allow us to expand our capacity. Fresh Start has a waiting list and at times has had to put a total pause on new referrals. Additional funding in the service would allow us to grow the team, support more women, and ultimately reducing the numbers of children going into the care system.

More funding would also have a significant impact on the quality and range of the support Fresh Start is able to offer. Extra resource would allow further development of volunteer and peer roles within the service as well building on the success of the initiative ideas such as 'She Learns, She Grows' programme. We believe Fresh Start could be one of the leading services of its type in the country.

earlier and wider support

Currently mothers are only referred to Fresh Start once care proceedings have ended. The evaluation highlights the significant benefit the service could have if it were involved earlier in the process. Earlier intervention would allow us to build relationships with legal representatives, limit the damage to trust in statutory services, and be able to better recognise the changes made by the women whilst accessing our services. This would allow Fresh Start workers to be important advocates for women at future hearings on decisions made around new pregnancies or potential reunifications.

removing barriers

Working with the local authority we want to better understand the breakdown of demographics impacted by child removal in the city and, using a co-production approach to explore how we can improve our support, offer to meet the needs of those who are often lesser represented in services.

further research

We hold the mothers we work with at the heart of the service, they are our priority and the reason our dedicated team do what they do. There is however a financial saving to the local authority for every potential repeat pregnancy and child removal Fresh Start prevents through its support. As well as these we can only guess the additional savings to other services in the city through Fresh Start interventions, including mental health, crisis support and emergency departments. Research into the financial impact of the project is essential so we can better make the case for our work.

The evidence shows that our empowerment model works, it works for the women, it works for their families, and it works for the city. With action on these four recommendations we believe Fresh Start can become a trailblazing service in the UK.

*I'm not the only person
hurting and in some
which way mourning
children because you've
lost them, there are so
many people out there*



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