

Case study Sheffield Alcohol Advisory Service



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About the Organisation:

SAAS offers free and confidential counselling for anyone who is affected by problems with alcohol; whether the problem is their own, or that of a friend or relative. Those in need of help can contact the service directly, or may be referred by GPs, Social Workers or Probation Officers. SAAS has served the Sheffield community for over thirty years, and is now the gateway to alcohol treatment services in Sheffield. In recent years the agency has diversified, and now also works with drug users in GPs' surgeries, has a parenting project called Families Together, and provides training around drugs and alcohol. SAAS currently employs 39 paid staff (two thirds of whom are full-time) and 15 volunteers, all of whom are appropriately qualified for their roles.

Feeling the impacts of the recession...

on the organisation itself:

SAAS is gearing up for an increase in demand for its services, which it expects to feed through as a lagged impact of the recession: “redundancy, long-term unemployment, financial difficulties and the stress and mental health issues that they bring are all common causes of alcohol problems,” explains Nicola Smith, Director at SAAS. On a positive note, SAAS has received some extra funding from Sheffield's Drug and Alcohol Action Team, which has enabled it to increase capacity. “We're very much going to need that,” says Nicola, “It takes a lot for people to call us and ask for help, and we want to be ready when they do that. We really don't want to put people on waiting lists.”

However, the problem is that this money, like much of SAAS' income, is only short-term. Some of SAAS' funding (which totalled £949,265 in the year 2007-8; with reserves amounting to £242,365) comes from one-year contracts; contracts that Nicola worries will not be renewed. “We fear imminent changes in funding,” she says, “because the local authority has to find savings, and we may be casualties of that.”

Any cuts in funding will be directly translated into loss of staff and thus of services, at a time when these services are most in demand. “We've always worked to keep management costs, overheads, etc to a minimum,” Nicola emphasises, “That way as much money as possible goes into our services. So if we lost any funding, there'd be no way we could avoid making staff redundant; everything else has been cut to the bone”.

“Yet our staff are our key asset in delivering our services,” she continues, “and what's more they're our capital. We've invested so much in them, in terms of training and so on. Losing staff

would be a great loss.”

Nicola is particularly anxious about a one-year contract that SAAS has secured from Sheffield’s Children and Young People’s services, to work with a small but significant number of families that are facing multiple difficulties: “Ironically some of the funding for that service may not continue. I say ironically because it’s exactly the kind of programme that policymakers are calling for (for example, in the Social Exclusion Taskforce report *Think Family**). If funding was cut then an important part of the service would not continue, at a time where it is needed even more.”

* http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/cabinetoffice/social_exclusion_task_force/assets/think_families/think_families.pdf

on individuals and local communities:

As mentioned above, SAAS expects the recession and the stresses it places upon individuals to lead to a higher incidence of alcohol- and substance-related problems. However, as well as the service users, Nicola points out that there are also effects on the individuals working for SAAS: “Staff know that some of our funding is not certain, and that has an unsettling effect on them, just at the time when they need to be ready to cope with the increased demand on their services.” Thus in her opinion, policymakers and infrastructure charities need to take into account not just the effects of the recession on the general public, but also the strains that it places on those working within the third sector.

Looking to the future:

There are three things that Nicola thinks would help SAAS to get through the recession. Firstly, SAAS has already benefitted from the work that Voluntary Action Sheffield has done on the recession (such as the *Beating the Recession* conference), and Nicola would like to see more of the same: “access to impartial and informed advice, from people who really know about the voluntary sector: that’s incredibly useful.”

Secondly, Nicola would like more funding for volunteers: “It’s fantastic having volunteers, but you also need the capacity to manage them. It’s really difficult to get funding for that.” Nicola has just received a grant from the Tudor Trust which will be used to appoint a volunteer coordinator, “but that person will also need a budget. It’s vital we secure resources for that.”

Finally, Nicola wants to see general funding granted on a longer-term basis. She complains that the government’s Hardship Fund, aimed at helping charities through the recession, offered grants that lasted only one year: “We really needed some of that money, but I was put off applying for it because we couldn’t demonstrate an exit strategy by September 2010. Often timescales are really unrealistic. If it’s going to fill a gap in your funding, a grant needs to last at least two years. With a one-year grant we never know if it’s worthwhile or even fair to recruit new staff.”

Moreover, money spent now could save money in the future, Nicola thinks: “With alcohol, if you catch a problem early then you save a lot of money down the line on healthcare etc,” she explains. What’s more, “if you enable people to make a really complete recovery, then they don’t come back into the system. They become active, fulfilled members of society again.”

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