



Evaluation of the Bristol Freedom Programme

On Behalf of the Bristol Freedom Programme Network
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Executive Summary

Aims

The aim of this evaluation was to examine the effectiveness of the Freedom Programme as provided by the Bristol Freedom Programme Network.

Evaluation Method

The evaluation involved collecting quantitative data from service users who volunteered to take part in the research. Service users were asked to complete an initial survey and were contacted by the research team at a later date to complete either a post survey (if they had completed the course) or an exit survey (if they dropped out). The data was entered into a statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS) database and analysed using that software.

Summary of findings

A number of key issues and findings emerged which are summarised here.

1. 27 women agreed to take part in the study and completed the initial survey.
2. The recruitment of participants was not consistent across the Bristol network with a large proportion coming from programmes based in central Bristol.
3. The majority (70%) of participants have a combined household income of less than £10,000 suggesting that poverty and low income might be a factor in determining those women who engage with the freedom programme.
4. A relatively high number of respondents live in council or housing association accommodation.
5. A relatively high number of the women described themselves as unemployed or self defined as 'unable to work'.
6. In addition, a relatively high number of women stated that they had a disability which was not visible, this included mental health issues.
7. Over half the women had moved house more than twice in the past five years. Unstable living arrangements can have a negative impact on women's ability to develop social networks, access training, education, or employment, and can negatively impact on children.
8. The majority of women (16) stated that what they most wanted from the programme was more confidence.
9. This was reflected in the fact that at the start of the programme the women reported low confidence, self-esteem, contentment, and reported feeling a lack of respect and feeling unloved.
10. The women described how at times they were overwhelmed by the information provided by the programme.
11. Only two of the respondents stated that they had contact with the local MARAC and three had had contact with the child protection register.
12. Eleven women stated that their current partner ever got angry or aggressive with them and twelve women said they had been frightened of their partner.

13. Partners appear to have more control over decisions which mainly affect them, a situation not replicated when addressing decisions which might only affect the female respondent.
14. 6 respondents said that decision making caused resentment or disagreements compared to 2 who said it did not.
15. Respondents stated that they disagreed often with their current partner in relation to the following issues: sexual activities; women's friends; women going out with their friends; and partner's anger towards women.
16. All of these key issues relate directly to women having independent social networks and how they subsequently choose to negotiate their sexual relations and their partner's angry responses to them.
17. When dealing with disagreements the largest number (n=10) said they would give in to keep the peace.
18. Twenty respondents said that their previous partner had been aggressive towards them and that they had been frightened of their ex-partner.
19. As with the response to questions about current partners, disagreements emerged in relation to the same issues: sexual activities; women's friends; women going out without their partner; and partners' anger towards.
20. In addition, when reflecting back on previous relationships, women identified additional areas where disagreements occurred. These were: women's relatives; partner's neediness; partner's jealousy; partner's alcohol or drug use; and finally, partner's physical violence towards them.
21. Looking at how women talk about their current and previous relationships is clearly a useful way to engage women without isolating them further. This is an interesting finding as achieving a balance between informing women about the dynamics of controlling behaviour without isolating them further as a result of them feeling the need to defend an abusive partner, can be difficult.
22. In relation to dealing with disagreements with previous partners 15 women said they would avoid the topic or change the subject and 17 (out of 22 respondents) said that they would normally give in to keep the peace.
23. Women sought help from GPs and the police, alongside respondents' friends and relatives. It is useful to note that respondents were less likely to seek help from their partners' relatives and none mentioned their partners' friends as a source of support. This may be significant when considering the potential impact of social awareness campaigns.
24. Eight respondents stated that at the time they thought that the abusive behaviour they experienced was their own fault, and 6 said that they didn't ask for help because they felt isolated.
25. The majority of partners (as identified by the female respondents) did not seek help. Those that did contacted the GP (n=3), Counsellors (n=2), someone at work (n=2), and victim support (n=2).
26. Women believed that their partners did not seek help because they didn't think it was a problem (n=10).
27. When contacted after the freedom programme, all of the women who talked about their experience of the FP reported positively on their experience of the programme.
28. The reasons given for exiting the programme prior to completion were: moved house (n=1); knew someone in the group (n=1); had issues with their children (n=2); and didn't like the people in the group (n=1).

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29. The women who had engaged with the programme reported much better ranges in terms of confidence and self esteem. All these women rated their contentment and happiness as either a 3 or 4.
30. The women felt that the most important thing they had got from attending the group was: feeling stronger about future relationships (n=3); had a better relationship with their children (n=2); felt more confident (n=1); and felt better able to spot the warning signs of an abusive relationship (n=1).

Conclusion

Based on the summary of the findings above, there are a number of specific conclusions and recommendations which can be drawn from this research evaluation. The aim of the FP is to teach women to recognise abusive behaviour and its impact appears to have been achieved, judging by the responses of the women. In particular, women reported that they were now making decisions more equally with their partners. The programme also seeks to help women build their self confidence and esteem which was also achieved.

It is important to recognise that in the Bristol network, facilitators are supported across the network in order to maintain the quality of the programme. Not all Freedom Programme facilitators have this support network, and the success of individual programmes is inevitably impacted by the skills of individual facilitators.

One of the queries raised at the beginning of the research was whether attendance on the programme had an impact on the number of children on the child protection register. Whilst the number of women in the follow-up precludes a statistical analysis of this, women did report better relationships with their children as a positive outcome from attendance on the programme.

There are a number of the findings that impact more directly on the future design, planning and running of the FP in Bristol. These include: 1) A need to find out more about invisible disabilities, including mental health issues which may have emerged as a result of experiences of abuse, in order to ensure that the programme accommodates needs related to such disability; 2) Changes may also be needed to show an appreciation of the limited choices open to women on low incomes and living in unstable housing; 3) This report demonstrates how FP facilitators sustain a much wider role in helping women who have experienced abuse and that the programme does not stand alone but as part of a wider range of multi-agency responses to domestic abuse. In relation to how the FP in Bristol could accommodate these issues, it would be helpful if facilitators had more information about the specific needs of the clients at the beginning of their engagement. This might take the form of an informal interview which specifically asks about visible and invisible disability, issues of poverty and low income, and the existing support networks which may be available to women.

Finally, this evaluation has shown that the FP has a positive impact on the lives of the women who take the programme and as such provides a service to assist women move on from abusive relationships and to be aware of potential abuse within future relationships. This is a positive outcome.

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Introduction

This report presents the findings of the on-going evaluation of the Freedom Programme as provided by facilitators within the Bristol Freedom Programme Network. This evaluation started in January 2008 and was extended in order to increase the number of service user participants who took part in the research.

The Freedom Programme

The Freedom Programme [1] (FP) is an intervention designed to empower women to make positive choices about their lives by providing information and support within a group context. Service users are encouraged to recognise abusive and domineering behaviour from their current or previous partners and to recognise the potential impact of abuse on themselves and their children. Practitioners of the FP are required to undergo training conducted by one of the programmes' recognised trainers.

The Bristol Freedom Programme Network consists of trained practitioners, located in the Bristol and South Gloucestershire area who currently run the Freedom Programme. The network is concerned primarily with examining the quality and consistency of services across the region. By sharing good practice (see appendix 1) and pooling resources they are additionally able to ensure that the programme meets the needs of women across the area. It should also be noted that the Bristol Network has also incorporated changes to the Freedom Programme in order to ensure that issues affecting BME women and those in same sex relationships are incorporated within the programme. The Bristol Network also has a policy of not using the Freedom Programme for men.

The Freedom Programme has been rolled out in many areas of the UK and is provided by licence trained practitioners in different locations. In Bristol the Freedom Programme Network was developed to share good practice and ensure the quality of the programmes implementation in the Bristol area. Despite being rolled out nationally by individually trained practitioners there is little evidence about the effectiveness of the FP. Local evaluations of individual programmes have been conducted but are primarily qualitative in nature and based on small samples (women attending a single programme) [2]. Data suggests however that satisfaction with the programme is high with 98.3% of participants rating the programme as successful at its completion, 96.6% up to six months afterwards, and 95% over six months [Deesside evaluation³].

Whilst there are a number of local evaluations of individual programmes, very little evaluation has been conducted involving a pre-post survey design.

The Programme

The programme runs for 12 weeks with specific information covered in each weekly session. Women can come into the programme at any time and can take each session as many times as they wish.

¹ <http://www.freedomprogramme.co.uk/site.htm>

² <http://www.freedomprogramme.co.uk/site.htm> See section on evaluation.

³ <http://www.freedomprogramme.co.uk/site.htm> See section on evaluation.

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These sessions include focusing on: the dominator; the bully; the bad father; the effects on children (part 1); the headworker; the jailer; the sexual controller; the effects on children (part 2); the king of the castle; the persuader; the liar; and the warning signs. Each of these sessions focuses on the different ways in which control and abuse can be manifest in the behaviour of the perpetrator. The final session is designed to help women identify potential warning signs, particularly in the development of future relationships.

Evaluation

The evaluation involved collecting quantitative data from service users who volunteered to take part in the research. The research was granted research ethics approval from the School for Policy Studies Research Ethics Committee. Service users were asked to complete an initial survey and then were contacted by the research team at a later date to complete either a post survey (if they had completed the course) or an exit survey (if they dropped out) . The data was entered into a statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS) database and analysed using that software.

During the pilot stage of this research project, advice was taken from a range of practitioners about the types of questions to be included in the survey. This included contact with the designer of the freedom programme, Pat Craven. She specifically raised the issue of whether there was an impact from attending the programme on the number of children on the child protection register. As such, a question was included to address this concern. Similarly, other questions were included within the survey to reflect the needs of the local freedom programme network and facilitators.

Recruitment

Service users were recruited to the research through individual programme facilitators. This was discussed with facilitators early within the research process. Information packs containing the participant information sheets, consent forms, and the survey, including stamped addressed envelopes, were distributed to all practitioners who are part of the Bristol Network. These practitioners were asked to actively disseminate the information to service users between March 2008 and September 2009. Practitioners were sent regular reminders that the research was still on-going and additional packs when requested. Due to a low initial response rate, the original timeframe for the research was extended (to September 2009) in order to give facilitators more time to disseminate the materials to potential participants.

Service Users

A total of 31 service users agreed to take part in the study and returned questionnaires. Four of these questionnaires were not complete which means that information was only analysed for the 27 respondents who completed the initial survey. It should also be noted that not all respondents answered all questions and as such the actual number of responses is given rather than percentages due to the small sample included.

Demographic factors

Demographic questions were asked to ascertain the general profile of the freedom programme population. The following is a breakdown of those findings.

Table 1: Age

		Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid	20-24	2	7.4
	25-29	4	14.8
	30-34	6	22.2
	35-39	3	11.1
	40-44	3	11.1
	45-49	3	11.1
	50-54	4	14.8
	55-59	2	7.4
	Total	27	100.0

As table 1 illustrates there was a wide distribution of age across those who agreed to take part in the survey.

In relation to ethnicity, 24 respondents stated that they were white, 1 mixed race, and 1 Asian/Asian British. Seven respondents identified as Christian, and 1 as Sikh. The disproportionate number of white respondents may be reflective of the sites within which recruitment for the study was high.

Twenty-two respondents identified as heterosexual, 3 stated explicitly that they did not want to answer that question and the remaining did not answer this question.

Eight respondents identified that they had a disability and 7 of those eight that the disability was not visible. This raises some questions about the need to ascertain from participants whether they have an invisible disability which may impact on their attendance and engagement with the programme. This may include a sensory impairment, learning disabilities, as well as mental health concerns such as depression and anxiety.

Table 2: Combined household income

		Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid	>10,000	17	70.8
	11,000-20,000	3	12.5
	21,000-30,000	2	8.3
	31,000-40,000	1	4.2
	>60,000	1	4.2
	Total	24	100.0

The majority (70%) of participants have a combined household income of less than £10,000 suggesting that poverty and low income might be a factor in determining those women who engage with the freedom programme. This may also highlight an area

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where the objectives of the course could be targeted to take account of the impact of low income on the choices of those who take the freedom programme.

Table 3: Accommodation

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid Private-owned	8	29.6
Private rented	4	14.8
Council Housing/Housing Assoc	12	44.4
Parents	1	3.7
Other	2	7.4
Total	27	100.0

The impact of low income is also evident by the relatively high number of respondents who live in council or housing association accommodation.

Table 4: Education - Highest Qualification

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid Standard Grade/GCSE	8	32.0
Higher/A level/ CSYS	1	4.0
SVQ/NVQ	5	20.0
Degree	3	12.0
Postgraduate Degree	1	4.0
Professional/Vocational Qualification	4	16.0
Other	3	12.0
Total	25	100.0

There was a range of educational achievement across the group to GCSE and vocational qualification standard. Three respondents had completed an undergraduate degree, 1 a postgraduate degree, and 1 person A-levels.

Table 5: Employment

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid Paid full-time work	5	20.0
Paid part-time work	3	12.0
Voluntary work	1	4.0
At college	2	8.0
Full-time homemaker	5	20.0
Other	9	36.0
Total	25	100.0

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As table 5 illustrates, 5 women were in full-time work and a further 3 in part-time employment. There were a large number of responses to this question that the women did 'other', this primarily related to those women who were unemployed or self defined as 'unable to work'.

Table 6: Times moved house in last 5 years

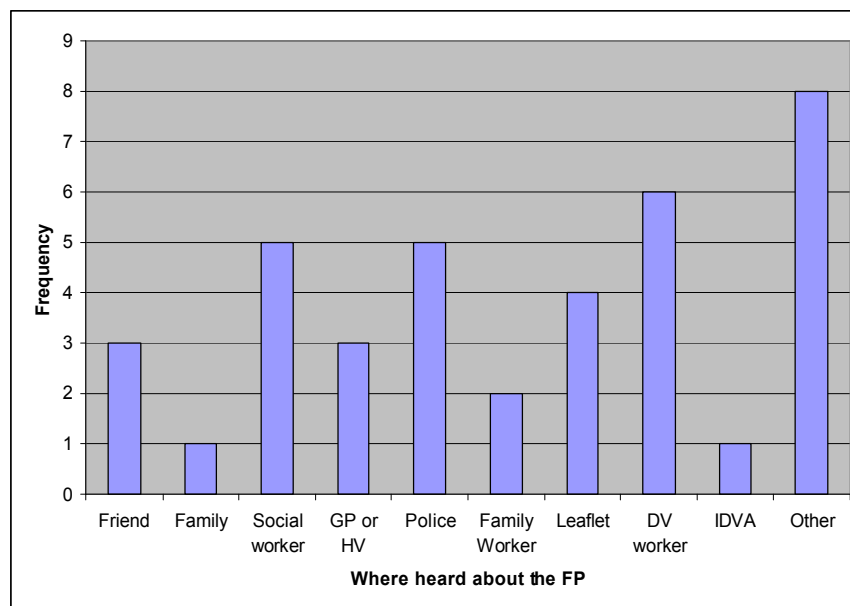
	Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid 0	6	28.6
1	3	14.3
2	4	19.0
3	4	19.0
4	3	14.3
5	1	4.8
Total	21	100.0

Finally, we asked respondents how many times in the last 5 years they had moved house. As table 6 illustrates over half of the respondents had moved house more than twice in that time period. This suggests that for many women on the programme their living arrangements are not particularly stable.

Knowledge and experience of the freedom programme

The following section deals with how the respondents came to be on the freedom programme and their relationship experiences.

Figure 1: How respondents had heard about the freedom programme



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As figure 1 shows, more women had heard about the programme from a domestic violence worker (predominately Next Link in Bristol), followed closely by the police or a social worker. Other ways in which women had heard of the programme included: school counsellor, Single Parent Action Network (SPAN), and the internet.

In relation to the particular programme that respondents were accessing, the majority were attending Central Bristol (12) with 1 from Hartcliffe/Knowle, 2 from Lockleaze, 2 from Lawrence Weston; and 5 attending other programmes.

Figure 2: Graph to show length of attendance on the programme

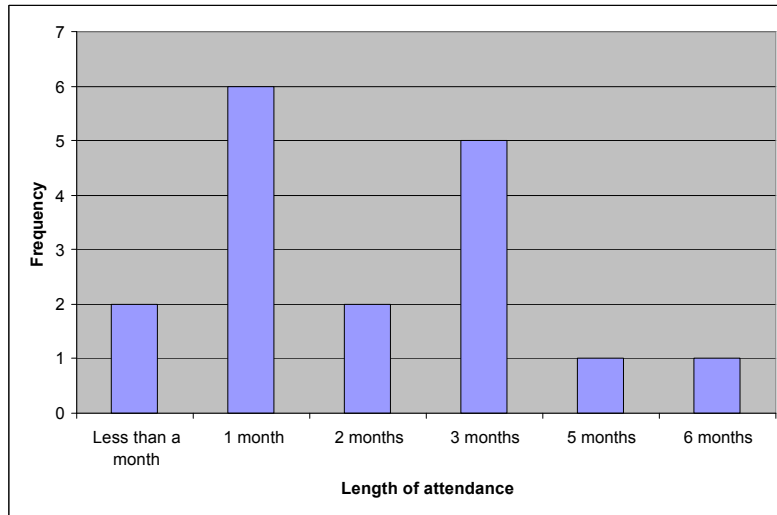
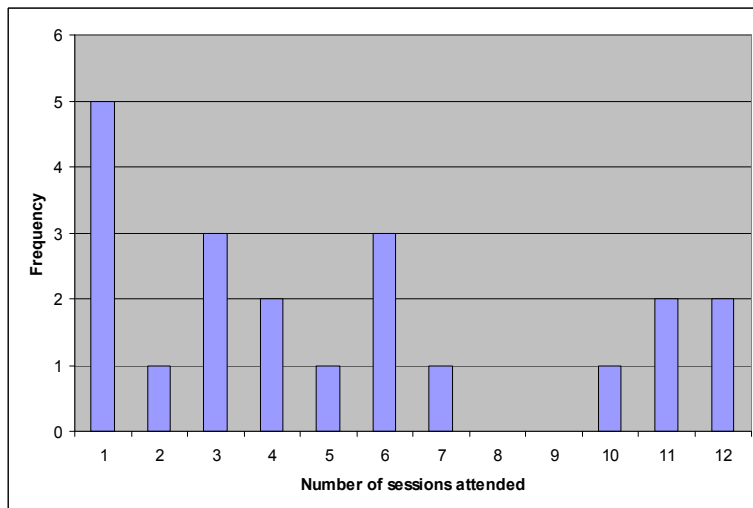


Figure 3: Graph to show number of sessions attended



As figures 2 and 3 above illustrate, not all of the respondents completed the survey at the start of their engagement with the freedom programme. Some had attended a few sessions, over differing periods of time, and 5 respondents had attended 10 or more sessions before completing the survey. This raises some methodological issues but also reflects the rolling nature of the programme.

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When asked about what was the most important thing that women wanted from the freedom programme, the majority (16) stated that they wanted more confidence; 3 wanted to leave their partners; 1 wanted a better relationship with their children, and 7 said that they wanted to be stronger in future relationships. This is an interesting finding, particularly given that the majority of the women claimed that their confidence and self esteem at the outset was low (see next section). This also raises questions about how women negotiate relationships more generally, whether those relationships are defined as abusive or not.

State of Well-Being

The survey asked a set of questions asking respondents to rank from 1 (= low) to 5 (= high) on how they felt. The types of feelings that were included were intended to correspond with the types of issues dealt with on the freedom programme and on knowledge from previous research about how those who experience domestic violence might feel. It should be noted that the responses outlined in table 7 below relate to how the participants felt before they had fully engaged with the freedom programme.

Table 7: Types of well-being pre-survey

Type of wellbeing	1 Low	2	3	4	5 High
Confidence	11	5	6	1	3
Self-esteem	11	11	2	1	1
Anxiety	6	2	3	6	8
Stress	4	1	6	6	9
Happiness	7	9	7	3	0
Contentment	6	12	4	2	0
Loved	10	5	7	3	1
Respected	11	9	5	1	0
Safe	6	6	4	5	6
Angry	8	2	8	3	5
Good Mother	2	4	4	4	7
Good Partner	6	4	5	2	4

Table 7 shows the ranking scores given by respondents to a range of feelings at the pre-survey point. Not surprisingly the women report low confidence, self-esteem, contentment, and report feeling a lack of respect and feeling unloved. There is a much wider response of feelings in relation to whether the women feel safe, anxious, or angry. The women were more likely to rank high in relation to whether they felt like a good mother compared to whether they felt like a good partner.

In terms of identifying any problems with the programme a small number (n=3) stated that they were sometimes overwhelmed by the information.

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Respondents were also asked whether they were currently being provided with other services from the organisation providing the freedom programme. Four (4) were receiving 1-1 counselling, 4 made use of the crèche facilities, 2 were receiving on-going training and support, 2 legal advice, 1 health visiting, 7 safety information, 1 housing advice, 3 support visits (outreach), 1 benefits advice. This finding recognises the wider role which freedom programme facilitators are asked by clients to fulfil with regards to signposting and wider advocacy. This raises additional issues about the training and local service knowledge of facilitators.

Only two of the respondents stated that they had contact with the local MARAC (Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Committee) and three had contact with the child protection register.

Current relationships

Seven women stated that they were currently in a relationship, 20 stated that they were not. Some of the women who were not currently in a relationship did respond to some of the questions in this section. This may be due to the way the survey was designed, or because answering the questions triggered memories of their most recent partner. It may also be because their relationships had just ended.

The survey asked about current, and then separately previous, partners. Of those in a current relationship 5 were married and 2 co-habiting. Three women in a relationship stated that they and their partner had children together. The length of the relationship ranged from 0-3 months (n=2); 13-24 months (n=1); 2-5 years (n= 5); 11-20 years (n=1); more than 20 years (n=1).

Eleven women stated that their current partner ever got angry or aggressive with them, and seven that they got angry with their partners. Twelve women said they had been frightened of their partner, with 2 stating that their partner had been frightened of them.

Table 8: Decision making in current relationship

	Usually you	Both equally	Usually partner
Where to live	4	4	6
How to decorate your house	6	1	7
What food you buy/eat/cook	8	2	4
How to divide up the household jobs	6	2	5
How to spend time with friends together	3	3	6
How to spend time with friends separately	5	3	5
When you see your family	6	2	5
When you see your partner's family	3	2	6
How to spend your leisure time	3	5	6
Moving jobs/doing further education/training	4	3	5
What to watch on the tv/cinema/dvd	3	5	6

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What pets you have	6	0	8
What clothes/hair style you wear	8	0	5
What clothes/hair style your partner wears	3	2	9
How to spend your joint money	2	3	6
How to spend your own money	6	3	5
When you have sex	3	2	7
When you get a lie-in	4	1	7
When your partner gets a lie-in	1	0	10

The responses to this questions reflect previous research which has found that in potentially abusive relationships women may have less control over decision making. Men appear to have more control over decisions which mainly affect them, a situation not replicated when addressing decisions which might only affect the female respondent. In terms of potential for disagreement, 6 respondents said that these types of decision making caused resentment or disagreements compared to 2 who said it did not.

Table 9: Table to show the frequency by which couples disagreed, openly or secretly, over a range of issues.

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
Partner's job / unemployment	6	1	3	1
Your job / unemployment	5	2	1	4
Partner's neediness	3	0	5	4
Your neediness	4	2	2	4
Partner's jealousy	3	3	3	3
Your jealousy	7	2	3	1
Your children	2	1	3	3
Step- children	3	2	1	3
Sexual activities	3	3	2	6
Partner's friends	6	1	3	2
Your friends	3	3	2	5
Partner's relatives	4	4	2	2
Your relatives	3	2	4	3
Partner's alcohol/drug use	5	2	4	2
Your alcohol/drug use	7	1	0	2
Partner going out socially without you	4	4	3	2
You going out socially without partner	3	2	3	5
Your partner's physical violence to you	5	1	4	3
Your physical violence to your partner	9	0	0	1
Your partner's anger to you	3	0	3	8
Your anger to your partner	6	3	1	1

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As table 9 above illustrates there are some key areas where respondents state that they disagree often. These include: sexual activities; women's friends; women going out with their friends; and partner's anger towards women. As with the data presented in table 8, previously, research⁴ suggests that it is within the context of women asserting their independence where issues of control can manifest themselves. All of these key issues relate directly to women having independent social networks and how they subsequently choose to negotiate their sexual relations and their partner's angry responses to them.

Respondents were then asked how these disagreements were usually resolved. Five respondents said that they would avoid the topic or change the subject, 2 stated that they would talk it through together, 3 said they would reach a compromise, or argue until one partner wins the disagreement. Six respondent said they would end up agreeing with their partner and three would seek support from family/friends. The largest number (n=10) said they would give in to keep the peace.

Previous relationships

As can be seen in the previous section, many women who take the freedom programme course do so after they have finished a relationship. As such, we specifically asked about previous relationships. We were particularly interested in how the women viewed the impact of such relationships on them as individuals. Twenty-two out of the 31 respondents said that they did not think they had been in a previous relationship which had not been good for them.

Twenty respondents said that their partner had been aggressive towards them and 7 that they had behaved in an angry or aggressive way towards their partner. Twenty respondents said they had been frightened of their ex-partner but only two stated that they thought their partner was sometimes frightened of them.

Table 10: Decision making in previous relationship.

	Usually you	Both equally	Usually partner
Where to live	10	2	10
How to decorate your house	7	6	9
What food you buy/eat/cook	9	2	11
How to divide up the household jobs	8		13
How to spend time with friends together	2	1	19
How to spend time with friends separately	4	2	16
When you see your family	7		15
When you see your partner's family	1		20
How to spend your leisure time	4	3	15
Moving jobs/doing further education/training	7	1	12
What to watch on the tv/cinema/dvd	3	3	16
What pets you have	4	3	13

⁴ Stark, E. (2007) *Coercive Control*, Oxford University Press; Oxford.

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What clothes/hair style you wear	7	1	12
What clothes/hair style your partner wears	1		18
How to spend your joint money	2	2	16
How to spend your own money	7	1	14
When you have sex		1	20
When you get a lie-in	2		19
When your partner gets a lie-in	1		18
Rules for the children	8	1	3
Discipline of children	9	2	5
How to spend time with children	10	1	5

The responses above, albeit answered retrospectively, show a picture in which male partners are making the majority of the decisions within relationships. It is only in relation to where they live (equally balanced), and issues relating to the children where this is not the case. Unsurprisingly therefore, 18 respondents stated that making the above decisions caused resentment and disagreements.

Table 11: Frequency of disagreements in previous relationships.

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
Partner's job / unemployment	7	2	5	8
Your job / unemployment	8	3	2	9
Partner's neediness	2	2	5	11
Your neediness	9	2	8	2
Partner's jealousy	6	1	2	11
Your jealousy	9	6	3	
Your children	4	2	5	7
Step- children	2	1	3	2
Sexual activities	4		8	10
Partner's friends	9	2	2	5
Your friends	5	2	1	11
Partner's relatives	4	1	8	7
Your relatives	5	2	2	12
Partner's alcohol/drug use	4	2	2	10
Your alcohol/drug use	9	2	2	
Partner going out socially without you	10	2	4	2
You going out socially without partner	6	1		10
Your partner's physical violence to you	4	2	3	11
Your physical violence to your partner	8	3		
Your partner's anger to you	2	1	5	14
Your anger to your partner	7	3	5	1

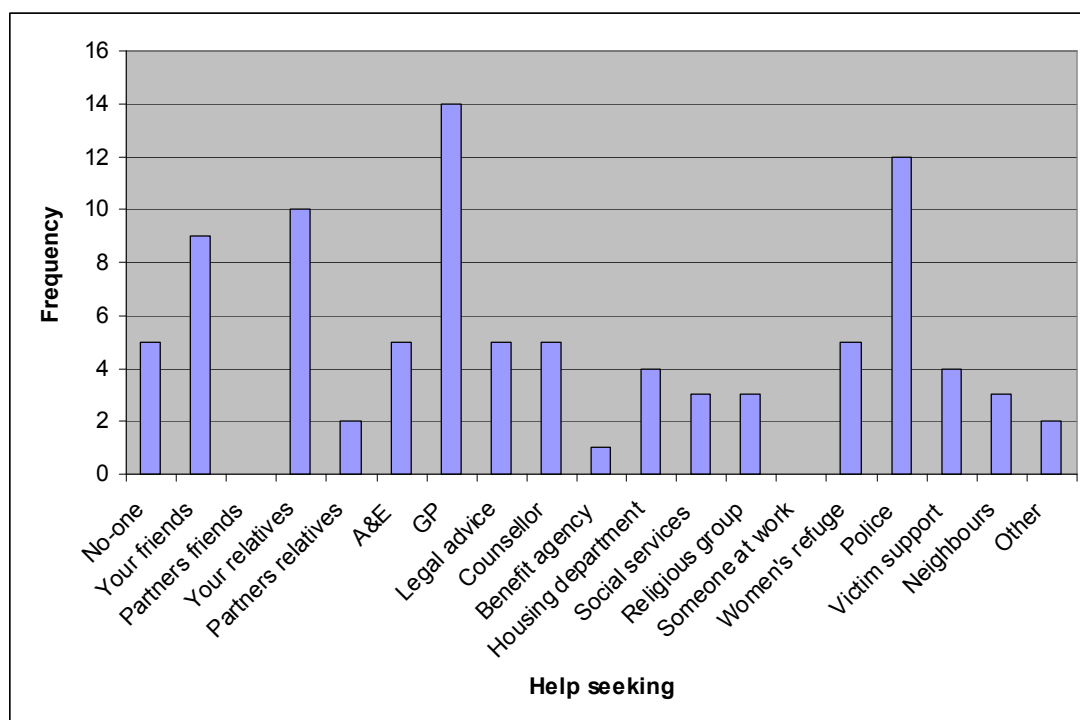
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As in responses to questions about a current relationship women stated that sexual activities; women's friends; women going out without their partner; and partners' anger towards them were issues which they disagreed about often. In addition, when reflecting back on previous relationships, women identified additional areas where disagreements occurred. These were: women's relatives; partner's neediness; partner's jealousy; partner's alcohol or drug use; and finally, partner's physical violence towards them. This may reflect the fact that once away from a controlling relationship women are able to be more reflective about that relationship. While they are in the relationship, informing women about the dynamics of controlling behaviour can result in them feeling the need to defend an abusive partner which can then isolate them from seeking help. Balancing these two aspects can be immensely difficult and it is interesting to note the changed view, once the relationship has ended. When asked how these disagreements were usually resolved, 1 respondent said that they would talk things through, 2 that they would reach a compromise or argue until one of them won, 6 said they would seek support from family or friends, 10 that they would end up agreeing with their ex-partner, 15 would avoid the topic or change the subject and 17 (out of 22 respondents) said that they would normally give in to keep the peace.

Seeking help

Respondents were asked about experiences of abuse and whether they had sought help from a range of different services.

Figure 4: Graph to show help-seeking of respondents



As figure 4 shows, the most frequently used services are GPs and the police alongside respondents' friends and relatives. It is useful to note that respondents were less likely to seek help from their partners' relatives and none mentioned their partners' friends as a

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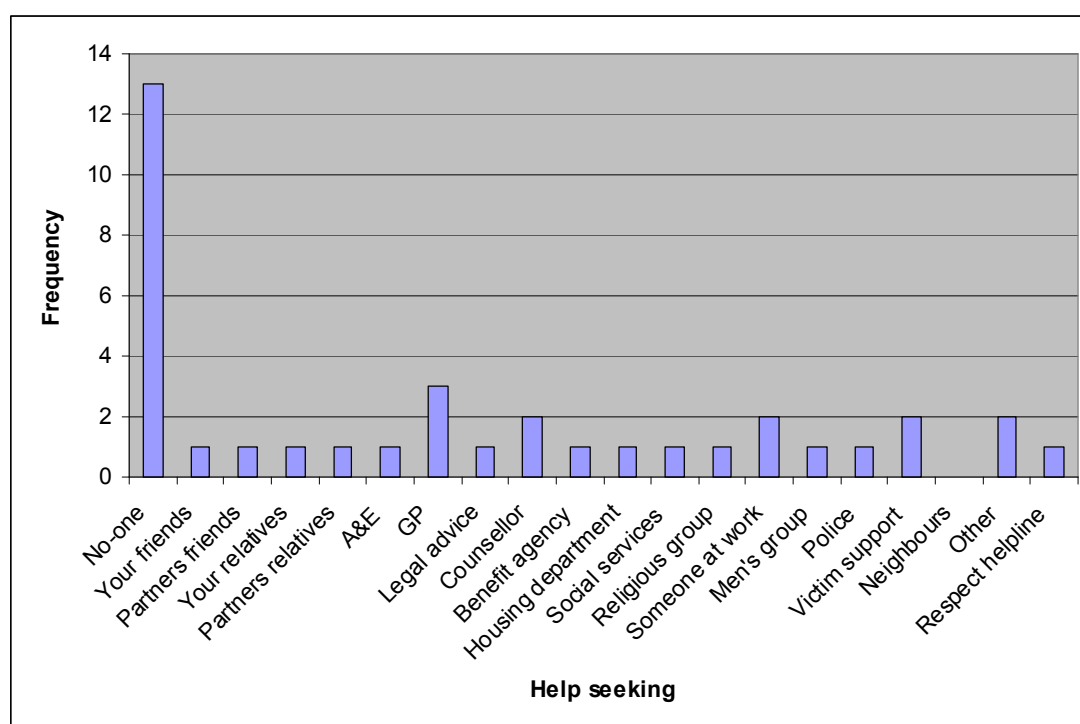
source of support. This may be due to potential accusations of jealousy if women seek help from their partners friends.

When asked about why they might not have sought help respondents stated that they had received a previous bad response (n=1); didn't think anyone could help (n=2); didn't think they would be believed (n=2); didn't think they would get a sympathetic response (n=1); feared the situation would get worse (n=5); didn't want anymore humiliation (n=6). Eight respondents stated that at the time they thought it was their own fault, and 6 said that they didn't ask for help because they felt isolated.

Partner's help seeking

Because the number of current partners is so low, this section only includes the responses given in relation to previous partner's help seeking.

Figure 5: Graph to show the help-seeking of previous partners.



Apart from GPs (n=3), Counsellors (n=2), someone at work (n=2), and victim support (n=2) most other sources of help were only identified once. The differences between the help accessed by respondents and their partners are very interesting, particularly in relation to the use of friends and relatives as sources of support.

When asked why they thought their partners might not have accessed help, respondents stated that: they thought it was a private matter and nobody else's business (n=7); didn't think anyone could help (n=1); didn't want any more humiliation (n=1); thought it was their own fault (n=3); and finally, the largest response that previous partners didn't think it was a problem (n=10). This finding corresponds to a large body of previous research

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which identifies the ways in which abusers deny and/or minimise the violence and abuse they use.

Post-intervention data

As outlined within the introduction to this report, the original design of the evaluation included a pre and post intervention questionnaire. In order to monitor the on-going impact of the freedom programme the research team set out procedures to regularly contact participants to check on their progress and to ascertain whether there had been changes to their circumstances since attending the programme. Despite being able to contact 8 women by telephone post freedom programme attendance, we were only able to complete 4 exit or post interviews. This was often due to the development of unforeseen problems, many of which were associated with on-going issues of domestic violence, as well as with the pressures created by generally chaotic lives. It is helpful to note that of the four women we had contact with but who were unable to complete the post survey, all replied positively on their experience of the freedom programme. This included an appreciation of the support they had got from the facilitators, and the knowledge they had gained through the content of the programme. Due to the very small sample of women included in this post data section, very few conclusions can be drawn statistically from changes in circumstances. Nevertheless, the responses have provided considerable qualitative evidence on the value of these courses and their impact.

There was some overlap between those who needed to complete an exit survey and those for whom a full post survey was appropriate. In some cases participants were asked both sets of questions. As such we were able to ascertain that the reasons given for why women may have dropped out of the programme were that they: moved house (n=1); knew someone in the group (n=1); had issues with their children (n=2); and didn't like the people in the group (n=1)⁵.

Of those we interviewed one had only attended the first session in which she had been recruited, the others had attended 6, 8, 12 sessions over 2, 3, and 18 months.

Within the previous sections dealing with the initial survey data it was clear that the women on the programme had initially had a very low sense of their own worth across a range of different areas. The three women who had engaged with the programme for more than one session reported much better ranges in terms of confidence and self esteem (2,3,4). All three women rated their contentment and happiness as either a 3 or 4⁶.

Service user's views

The following are brief pen portraits of those respondents we were able to interview following their intervention with the freedom programme. They outline what the women said about their experience of the programme and how their lives had changed.

Respondent 1: The most important benefit was that she thinks she will be stronger in future relationships and more able to spot the warning signs of abusive or controlling behaviour. She also felt that she was able to see how she had previously minimized the abusive behaviour of her partner. Since attending the freedom programme, this respondent has been in contact with the police and the courts in order to move on and away from her previously abusive partner. In this case the freedom programme was part

⁵ These categories were not exclusive categories which means that women could give more than one answer.

⁶ The range was 1=low to 5=high.

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of a wider multi-agency response which was described as “brilliant”. This respondent keeps the book [used within the freedom programme] by her bed as a reminder.

Respondent 2: The most important benefit was that she thinks she will be stronger in future relationships but also that she has a much better relationship with her children. She feels more able overall and less trapped than before she attended the programme. There was some suggestion in the interview that this respondent’s new current partner may also be controlling in some aspects of her life but the respondent was able to identify that this was an issue and was working with a specialist domestic violence worker to address this.

Respondent 3: The most important benefit was that she feels more confident and has a better relationship with her children. The women’s refuge was the most helpful service due to the space it gave her to get away from her abusive partner and support her to pick up the pieces of her life, including her relationship with her children and her ability to parent them.

Respondent 4: The most important benefit was that she feels more confident. She had had some on-going support calls and visits from local specialist providers. During the programme she felt that sometimes the issues raised could catch you “off guard” and could be difficult to deal with.

These views identify how the women felt that the most important aspect of the programme was that they felt more confident, felt that they would be in a position to have stronger relationships in the future, and that attendance had strengthen their relationships with their children.

All four women were very positive about their experience of the programme, even where the sessions were described as difficult and with the potential to raise unexpected and disturbing emotional issues.

In complex cases the freedom programme had been experienced as part of a wider multi-agency response and was perceived as a positive part of that response.

Summary and conclusions

This report has outlined the findings from the evaluation of the freedom programme in Bristol. A number of key issues and findings emerged which are summarised here.

1. 27 women agreed to take part in the study and completed the initial survey.
2. The recruitment of participants was not consistent across the Bristol network with a large proportion coming from programmes based in central Bristol.
3. The majority (70%) of participants have a combined household income of less than £10,000 suggesting that poverty and low income might be a factor in determining those women who engage with the freedom programme.
4. A relatively high number of respondents live in council or housing association accommodation.
5. A relatively high number of the women described themselves as unemployed or self defined as ‘unable to work’.
6. In addition, a relatively high number of women stated that they had a disability which was not visible, this included mental health issues.

7. Over half the women had moved house more than twice in the past five years. Unstable living arrangements can have a negative impact on women's ability to develop social networks, access training, education, or employment, and can negatively impact on children.
8. The majority of women (16) stated that what they most wanted from the programme was more confidence.
9. This was reflected in the fact that at the start of the programme the women reported low confidence, self-esteem, contentment, and reported feeling a lack of respect and feeling unloved.
10. The women described how at times they were overwhelmed by the information provided by the programme.
11. Only two of the respondents stated that they had contact with the local MARAC and three had had contact with the child protection register.
12. Eleven women stated that their current partner ever got angry or aggressive with them and twelve women said they had been frightened of their partner.
13. Partners appear to have more control over decisions which mainly affect them, a situation not replicated when addressing decisions which might only affect the female respondent.
14. 6 respondents said that decision making caused resentment or disagreements compared to 2 who said it did not.
15. Respondents stated that they disagreed often with their current partner in relation to the following issues: sexual activities; women's friends; women going out with their friends; and partner's anger towards women.
16. All of these key issues relate directly to women having independent social networks and how they subsequently choose to negotiate their sexual relations and their partner's angry responses to them.
17. When dealing with disagreements the largest number (n=10) said they would give in to keep the peace.
18. Twenty respondents said that their previous partner had been aggressive towards them and that they had been frightened of their ex-partner.
19. As with the response to questions about current partners, disagreements emerged in relation to the same issues: sexual activities; women's friends; women going out without their partner; and partners' anger towards.
20. In addition, when reflecting back on previous relationships, women identified additional areas where disagreements occurred. These were: women's relatives; partner's neediness; partner's jealousy; partner's alcohol or drug use; and finally, partner's physical violence towards them.
21. Looking at how women talk about their current and previous relationships is clearly a useful way to engage women without isolating them further. This is an interesting finding as achieving a balance between informing women about the dynamics of controlling behaviour without isolating them further as a result of them feeling the need to defend an abusive partner, can be difficult.
22. In relation to dealing with disagreements with previous partners 15 women said they would avoid the topic or change the subject and 17 (out of 22 respondents) said that they would normally give in to keep the peace.
23. Women sought help from GPs and the police, alongside respondents' friends and relatives. It is useful to note that respondents were less likely to seek help from their partners' relatives and none mentioned their partners' friends as a source of support. This may be significant when considering the potential impact of social awareness campaigns.

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24. Eight respondents stated that at the time they thought that the abusive behaviour they experienced was their own fault, and 6 said that they didn't ask for help because they felt isolated.
25. The majority of partners (as identified by the female respondents) did not seek help. Those that did contacted the GP (n=3), Counsellors (n=2), someone at work (n=2), and victim support (n=2).
26. Women believed that their partners did not seek help because they didn't think it was a problem (n=10).
27. When contacted after the freedom programme, all of the women who talked about their experience of the FP reported positively on their experience of the programme.
28. The reasons given for exiting the programme prior to completion were: moved house (n=1); knew someone in the group (n=1); had issues with their children (n=2); and didn't like the people in the group (n=1).
29. The women who had engaged with the programme reported much better ranges in terms of confidence and self esteem. All these women rated their contentment and happiness as either a 3 or 4.
30. The women felt that the most important thing they had got from attending the group was: feeling stronger about future relationships (n=3); had a better relationship with their children (n=2); felt more confident (n=1); and felt better able to spot the warning signs of an abusive relationship (n=1).

Conclusion

Based on the summary of the findings above, there are a number of specific conclusions and recommendations which can be drawn from this research evaluation. The aim of the FP is to teach women to recognise abusive behaviour and its impact appears to have been achieved, judging by the responses of the women. In particular, women reported that they were now making decisions more equally with their partners. The programme also seeks to help women build their self confidence and esteem which was also achieved.

It is important to recognise that in the Bristol network, facilitators are supported across the network in order to maintain the quality of the programme. Not all Freedom Programme facilitators have this support network, and the success of individual programmes is inevitably impacted by the skills of individual facilitators.

One of the queries raised at the beginning of the research was whether attendance on the programme had an impact on the number of children on the child protection register. Whilst the number of women in the follow-up precludes a statistical analysis of this, women did report better relationships with their children as a positive outcome from attendance on the programme.

There are a number of the findings that impact more directly on the future design, planning and running of the FP in Bristol. These include: 1) A need to find out more about invisible disabilities, including mental health issues which may have emerged as a result of experiences of abuse, in order to ensure that the programme accommodates needs related to such disability; 2) Changes may also be needed to show an appreciation of the limited choices open to women on low incomes and living in unstable housing; 3) This report demonstrates how FP facilitators sustain a much wider role in helping women who have experienced abuse and that the programme does not stand alone but as part of a wider range of multi-agency responses to domestic abuse. In relation to how the FP in Bristol could accommodate these issues, it would be helpful if facilitators had more information about the specific needs of the clients at the beginning of their engagement. This might take the form of an informal interview which specifically asks

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about visible and invisible disability, issues of poverty and low income, and the existing support networks which may be available to women.

Finally, this evaluation has shown that the FP has a positive impact on the lives of the women who take the programme and as such provides a service to assist women move on from abusive relationships and to be aware of potential abuse within future relationships. This is a positive outcome.

Appendix 1: Good practice guidance of the Bristol Freedom Programme Network.

Aims of the Freedom Programme groups for women programme

- To promote and prioritise the safety of women and children
- To reduce the isolation of victims of domestic violence and abuse (DVA)
- To increase the knowledge and understanding of women of the causes and consequences of DVA
- To inform women of the importance of safety planning and how to access support
- To provide a supportive environment for women to reflect on their experiences,

BUT

Freedom Programme is not a safety planning mechanism and agencies need to continue to offer support and safety planning.

Facilitators will:

- Have attended an authorised 2-day training course (from an authorised trainer).
- Agree to deliver the FP in Bristol in accordance with these criteria for good practice and following agreed Bristol adaptations to the basic FP programme.
- Have attended training in understanding domestic violence and abuse – the dynamics of abuse, impact on survivors including children, understanding abusers, impact of diversity, basic rights of survivors, local/national support available – before starting to facilitate FP groups.
- Attend training organised by the FP network (or equivalent training elsewhere) in relevant skills, such as managing groups.
- Attend approximately 6-weekly external supervision with their sessional co-facilitator(s), with a skilled and knowledgeable practitioner/supervisor.
- Attend at least seventy-five percent of the Bristol FP network meetings, to liaise with other local facilitators, and will share learning and receive peer support. The meetings will take place in a variety of locations across the city, to enable as many to attend as possible. The main purpose of external supervision is to address any emotional needs resulting from facilitating the FP, resolve any issues with co-facilitators and ensure professional boundaries with service users are maintained
- Deliver the FP sessions in a respectful and non-judgmental way.
- Acknowledge and respond to the diversity of different women's experiences of DVA, highlighting the compounding effects on DVA by racism, homophobia, ageism, classism and disablism..

FP sessions

- **Confidentiality:**

- Sessions will be advertised and signposted in a way that protects the identity of those taking part;
- Participants will be reminded at each session of the measures they need to take to protect the confidentiality of themselves and of the other participants, with the exception of issues of child protection, which will be reported in accordance with the child protection policy of the facilitators' employers;
- Facilitators will not give out any information about participants to other agencies, unless participants specifically request them in writing to do so. For example, Social Care will be denied any request to report on women's 'progress'. The exception will be where a woman is subject to a MARAC, in which case information will be shared in accordance with MARAC confidentiality procedures.
- All facilitators, and any others such as interpreters or carers who attend FP groups, will agree to be bound by the confidentiality rules.
- Safety planning will be included both on first contact with a new participant and at the end of every session. Facilitators will offer leaflets, bra cards and agency telephone contact details to all participants. Where additional safety information is requested or needed, facilitators will signpost participants to an appropriate agency or will obtain the new information and pass it on themselves. Facilitators will need to ensure that for specific one-to-one work safety planning with women they refer them to relevant specialist agencies with trained staff.
- A crèche will be provided, or reimbursement of care costs, where applicable.
- Sessions will take place in a building that is accessible to participants with different needs and that is sensitive to diverse cultural/religious backgrounds. Other access needs, such as signers and carers, will be funded wherever possible.
- FP sessions will be free of charge to participants.
- There will always be at least 2 facilitators, always female, who will show an example of a respectful and equal relationship in the group sessions.
- Trained but inexperienced facilitators may attend sessions, as an observer, to develop their skills and confidence. A maximum of 1 observer per session will be permitted.
- Each session will be evaluated by participants and a record kept of evaluation.
- Facilitators will make participants aware of the complaints policies of their employing organisations.

Bristol FP facilitators will be asked to sign their agreement to the above; courses will not be advertised by Safer Bristol or BDAF unless facilitators comply and any funding for FP courses through the Bristol FP network (currently funded by Safer Bristol) will be dependent on this.

