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The groups meet weekly in public places, such as pubs and cafes, empowering group members to become part of the wider community and begin the process of change in their lives. The members decide the conversation topics, the venues and the times at which they meet.

A group of ladies in Hinckley shared their views and told us how much they valued their friendship group:

"If this group hadn't been set up I wouldn't have attempted to make new friends on my own. I'd still be sitting at home on my own."

"We're like any other group of friends. We care about each other and support each other.

Apart from our weekly meetings we also go out for meals and chat on the phone."

Commenting on this successful partnership with ACCEPT, LPT's Chief Executive Antony Sheehan said; "I really appreciate the great work that ACCEPT has achieved. We are working closely with communities and partner organisations as part of our commitment to improve opportunities and support for service users and their families."

ACCEPT is planning to widen this innovative approach and hopes to work with other LPT staff to set up new friendship groups in other areas of the county as well as establish groups in other areas of the country.

"Setting up these social groups was a wonderful idea. I've now got friends that understand me and what I've been through."

"We meet every week and all really look forward to it. No-one else in the pub knows we've got mental problems - we're just a group of friends that meet up every week for a gossip and a catch up."

"Without my friends in the group I know I would be back in hospital. Their support really helps my recovery."

"My family don't understand my depression and that I get lonely, my friends here help tremendously."

"The group has helped to build my confidence and I've done things that I wouldn't have done without their support."

"When the group was first set up it was a bit awkward at the start, but that quickly passed and we were soon chatting and sharing our interest - I can't imagine my life without these friends now."

"If people were offered the opportunity to join one of these groups, I'd tell them to do it. They'd get so much out of it."

Bringing hope through friendship



# The voice of hope

Issue 8: Intro to Partnership Working

www.accept-mht.com

Registered Charity No. 1101764

## Growing in confidence through friendship

The story of a member of one of ACCEPT's Friendship Groups

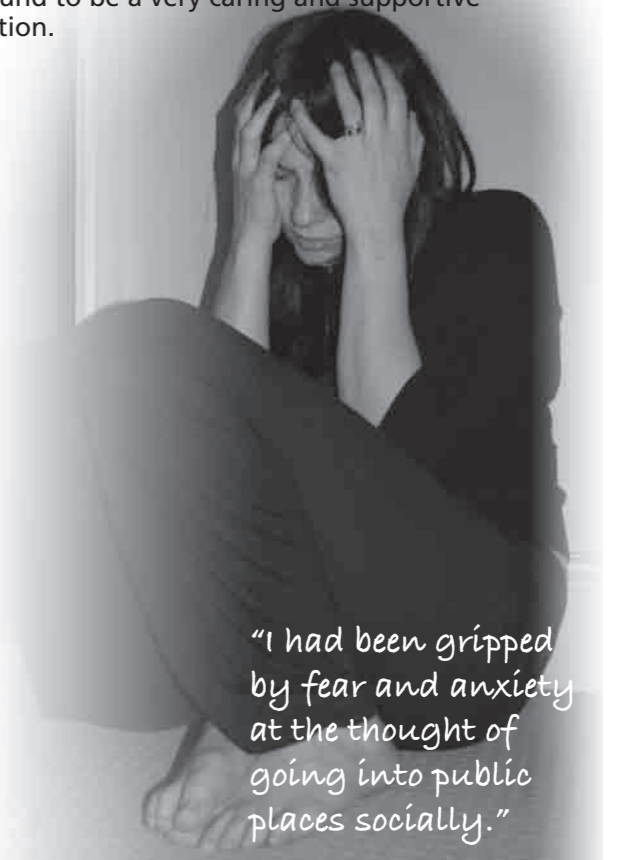
Since the birth of my first child, 14 years ago, I have had manic depression. Within this time I had been gripped by fear and anxiety at the thought of going into public places socially. I was referred to ACCEPT by my Community Psychiatric Nurse in order to help me build friendships and overcome some of these problems.

I was very anxious before the first meeting of the ACCEPT Group as I am a quiet person and find it difficult to start up a conversation. However, right from

the start, I was put at ease by the friendliness of the staff, volunteers and other group members. During the first 8 weeks, we had an opportunity to discuss what each of us wanted from the group and to get to know one other.

Within the initial 8 weeks, the group also decided to meet in a local pub, which was daunting for me to begin with, as this is not a place I would usually go to. After the first couple of weeks, I grew in confidence enough to walk into the pub by myself, and I can now go into the pub without any anxiety. I have also grown in confidence in talking with other people and am finding that I am now able to hold a conversation with these people. The meetings have become more relaxed and it now feels like a group of friends meeting, rather than a formal group.

I feel very motivated to continue to meet and deepen the friendships I have made through ACCEPT, which I have found to be a very caring and supportive organisation.



"I had been gripped by fear and anxiety at the thought of going into public places socially."

### Antony Sheehan, Chief Executive Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust

I really appreciate the great work that ACCEPT has achieved. The Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust (LPT) is working closely with communities and partner organisations as part of its commitment to improve opportunities and support for service users and their families. ACCEPT has enabled friendships to be built, in community settings, for those experiencing isolation due to mental health issues, which is invaluable.

Their facilitation of partnership working between mental health service providers and local churches provides a sustainable model that promotes wellbeing and social inclusion. Our staff have found that working in partnership with ACCEPT provides them professionally with the opportunity to be involved in a dynamic and unique approach to mental health care, that both supports and complements their own interventions with clients.

ACCEPT is an evolving Christian based charity whose vision is to bring hope, through friendship, to people experiencing mental health problems.

Working in partnership with mental health service providers and churches, our mission is to raise awareness, challenge stigma and facilitate support networks.

We want our supporters to play a big part in enabling more people who are socially isolated to benefit from the ACCEPT Friendship Group Model

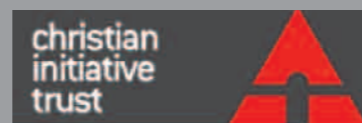
The best way you can help us to continue to bring

### The voice of hope

is becoming an ACCEPT PARTNER by making a standing order of at least £5/month

PLEASE JOIN US AND HELP US TO DO MORE! Please see inside flyer for further details

The Henry Smith Charity



Partnership Grant Programme  
of the Primary Care Trusts & Social Services Depts in  
Leicestershire & Rutland



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## ACCEPT Friendship Groups A Modern Concept

Tina Hurst, Community Psychiatric Nurse  
Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust

When Aidan visited our Community Mental Health Team in Coalville to give a talk about the ACCEPT Friendship Groups and the aim of setting one up in the locality, it was to me a revelation. As a Community Psychiatric Nurse (CPN) with a particular interest in user involved projects, it presented an opportunity to become involved in something new and different in our area. It also allowed me to work in partnership with an organisation that had something valuable to offer mental health outside the statutory health and social services. **The approach, ethos and philosophy are therefore refreshingly different.**

With Aidan's guidance and in partnership with staff and volunteers from local churches we were able to set up two groups, one in Coalville, the other in Ashby.

Whilst the groups are new and still developing, they have provided clients with an opportunity to meet other service users, share experiences and enjoy each others company in a safe environment. New friends have been made, choice of venue has been their own and attendance provides something each week to look forward to. **They report enjoying the feeling of being accepted for themselves, a sense of belonging, empowerment and ownership of the group** – it is something of their own. Group members have also acknowledged the support they experience, the fun and ideas shared and an improved

confidence and self esteem. Currently, both groups are exploring ideas about outings in the better weather.

At a time when social care provision is being re-organised (with the loss of day centres) these groups have enabled us to offer something that fits well with the new Social Inclusion Policy. Interestingly, the clients who are more committed to the groups are those who are less involved with other services. This suggests the groups offer something quite unique, which we hope to expand in the future.

Professionally, working with ACCEPT has enabled me to expand my skills. Indeed, it has been enlightening to move out of the CPN role and to work from a different perspective. This offers new ideas of how and where our service delivery could develop.

The ACCEPT Mental Health Trust is both professional and organised in approach. The 8 week introductory group-building course is simple and non-threatening. The bi-monthly reviews are very useful, enabling clients to air their views and pinpoint any problems. This helps with the group's evolution. Supervision with the Volunteer Group Development Workers provides time for reflection and discussion, particularly allowing insight into the group's dynamics.

Our health team's working area is predominantly rural and access to services difficult for some clients. My colleagues have asked about groups being set up in their own particular areas, which is something I hope we can address. I recommend other professionals get involved, as this type of group clearly benefits our clients, improving their quality of life, hopefully reducing relapse and potentially enabling them to move on to develop other aspects of their lives.

Working with Aidan and the volunteers from ACCEPT demonstrates very well how health services and outside organisations can work together to achieve a positive outcome in mental wellbeing.

*"...enjoying the feeling of being accepted for themselves, a sense of belonging, empowerment and ownership of the group."*

**84% of people with mental health problems feel isolated (MIND Survey)**

## The uniqueness of the ACCEPT Group Model: Ensuring needs are met through a range of services

Kate Spencer, Director at West Leicestershire Mind ( WLMind )

I have worked in mental health for over 8 years, both in the voluntary and statutory sector, where my experience has helped me to understand the range of services and approaches needed to support people with mental health difficulties. My time at WLMind, during the last year, has been both very rewarding and challenging, as we have had to tender to secure our services. All the commitment, vision and hard work paid off by being awarded a contract to deliver 10 Social Drop In Groups each week, alongside a Befriending Scheme in Hinckley and Bosworth and North West Leicestershire.

Every individual is unique, and therefore different support and services need to be available. When people first access services, the focus should be about looking at the individual's needs, rather than trying to fit people into services. The groups we run are large (15-20 people) and for some service users it can be quite daunting walking into a room where there are many people. For many service users it works and they get support and friendship, and are able to develop confidence and self esteem.

However, some service users do not feel comfortable in larger groups and there is a big jump from the Befriending Scheme to the Social Drop In Groups. Some people do not engage with services because they are not meeting their needs. **I believe ACCEPT really fills a gap in provision with their great model of smaller groups** (6-8 people) meeting in a public building. This works really well, promotes social inclusion and offers something that the Social Drop In Groups do not. Having a range of services helps to ensure that people do not 'fall through the net' and are not left without a service. You really have to visit different types of groups to fully understand the variety that is offered to people and this includes appreciating the uniqueness of the ACCEPT Group Model.

I worked as a Co-Facilitator to set up an ACCEPT Friendship Group and have found the experience extremely rewarding. My role has included carrying out assessments, establishing the first 8 weeks of the group, providing supervision to the volunteers and facilitating reviews. I feel that ACCEPT is a professional organisation with excellent guidelines and boundaries and I would highly recommend the experience of partnership working to other mental health organisations/workers.



Volunteer Group Development Workers Angharad Binns (left) and Maria Crowley (middle) discuss issues in a supervision session with Kate Spencer, Director West Leicestershire MIND

## Working in Partnership to tackle Social Isolation

Nicky Mawer, Communications Manager  
Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust

Social relationships are important to anyone in maintaining their health and wellbeing, and people experiencing mental illness are no exception. People with mental ill health often spend time alone and can feel misunderstood and afraid of rejection because of their illness. They can become very socially withdrawn and lonely, finding it difficult to interact and make friends.

The ACCEPT Mental Health Trust has helped many people regain their social confidence by developing 'friendship groups'. Working in close partnership with the Leicestershire Partnership NHS Trust ( LPT ), this innovative idea has grown and several groups now meet regularly in different areas of the county, including Hinckley, Coalville, Ashby and Lutterworth.

The friendship groups consist of individuals who may have experienced isolation from families, friends and wider society because of mental health problems. Training is provided to volunteers from local churches,

who take on the responsibility for the weekly meetings where ongoing friendships are established.

ACCEPT's founder, Aidan Lucas, developed the idea of friendship groups ( previously known as social support groups ) in 2004. Aidan explained "With support from the LPT and input from their community mental health staff we ran a pilot project for a year and the groups seemed to work really well in meeting an unmet need."

"The project's main success is the focus on forming lasting relationships with group members. A number of people struggling with poor mental health have benefited greatly. Many firm friendships have been developed as a result of these groups."

*Continued overleaf...*

ACCEPT's Friendship Group Model, involving collaborative working between local churches and mental health service providers ( NHS, Social Services, MIND etc) is now being used in other locations of the UK.

Please contact us if you are interested in establishing a Friendship Group in your area.