

Episode 21: If It Wasn't For Routes

Podcast Transcript

Life with Alcohol and Drugs

Host: Rebecca Bradley

Guest Speaker: Claire Wadsworth + Jess Goddard + Young People

Introduction:

Welcome back to another episode of Life with Alcohol and Drugs, from the charity Scottish Families.

Interview Begins

Rebecca:

Today we are joined by Claire Wadsworth, who is our Senior Development Officer for Routes, our young person project. It's quite exciting because we are now launching our report: If it wasn't for Routes, which has looked at the project itself over the last three years, what's come out of it, the research and the findings, and all of those sorts of things.

Do you want to share a little bit about Routes, how it started and where it is now?

Claire:

Thanks, Rebecca. Routes started nearly four years ago, three and a half years ago, because we were working with family members, and quite often I would be asked to speak to family member's children or grandchildren, and we didn't work with young people at the time and it felt like it was a big gap, particularly for young adults in their teenage years. We applied for funding to do a pilot project, to see how that would work, and it has really taken off from there. It has been really successful. Young people who wouldn't traditionally engage with services have been with us, many of them since the start. There is really high engagement with these young people because we persevere; we don't give up on them. They are used to being a little bit suspicious perhaps of professionals, having them in and out of their lives, so you have to work hard to gain their trust.

That was what the basis of Routes was founded on, and realising there was a need for it and there was not really anything like it in the areas we worked in. When we started we had maybe five or six young people whose parents or grandparents we were already working with. It was co-developed with the young people, we asked them what they wanted. They were very clear that they didn't want to have a group where they sat around talking about what home was like. They wanted to have a bit of respite from what can be a stressful home life. They wanted to know there were other young people who were going through something similar. They felt like they were the only person going through that because of the stigma of drugs and alcohol. So that was really important to them, that they knew that although they didn't have to talk about it, everyone was there for the same reason.

Because it was co-developed, we didn't have a name when we started, we didn't really know what it was going to look like, so it was really hard to promote something when you had no idea what it was going to be about, but pretty quickly we realised what was important to the young people, and that was just having a fun time together, having other people around who were going through the same thing, having a trusted role model and adult staff that they could have fun with, that they didn't see as social workers or teachers, that they kind of saw as a - I'm trying to think of a word that doesn't make us sound unprofessional - I suppose it is someone that they feel really comfortable with and that they can

rely on, trust to tell things to, and if they need help they can get it. We will do that in a way that is in conjunction with them, so if they are telling us something, if there is any risk we won't just rush and deal with it without telling them; we work together to get a solution for some of their problems. And we treat them like young adults rather than young children, which I think is really important. The name 'Routes', it came about because we had a long discussion about the name, and lots of different suggestions were made. Routes came about because they felt that they shouldn't be embarrassed about their roots; they are a part of where they came from, their roots were important to them, but also, the roots that they came from shouldn't define their route in life, so that's the reason we spelt it r o u t e, because yes, your roots don't define the route that you take in life. That's how Routes came about.

Rebecca:

It's based right now in East and West Dunbartonshire, but it's also for young people who are 12-26, which is already quite a difficult age range to reach, because you've got children in the younger ages, which is where most support services are and things like that, but there are older teenagers and young people who are tough to reach, and Routes has been touching that anyways.

Claire:

Yes, and one of the unique things about Routes is that we don't really have a set time, so a lot of our young people, when you meet them and they love Routes, they ask, how long am I with you for? You're like, actually, until you are 26, and one of them said, 'Oh, I want it to be until I'm 76.' It's important to them that there's not a time limit, like for 6 months, because some of our young people have taken 6 months to become comfortable with us. They have a lot of trust issues, which is understandable, a lot of them have been through a lot of trauma, so it's important that they don't feel rushed or they feel that the support is going to be whipped away from them.

Their parents, rightly so, have support for as long as it takes them to recover from drugs or alcohol, and it feels right that they should have support for as long as it takes them to feel like they are ready to set off on their own. I think that's one of the major factors that has made Routes such a success, and, as you say, some of them started with us at 12 or 13 and have been with us since then but are now 16 or 17, they are now going to college or looking for work. We are taking them there, we are taking them to meet college advisors before college starts, like some of us were sitting outside on the first day in the car, so if they get worried, we're outside. You are seeing them through this really difficult period of transition that they wouldn't normally have support with. So, it's been lovely to see that you are changing the path that some of these young people might take. It's too scary for them to think about going to college or apply for a job without our support.

That's something that we learned from the pilot project: how important it is to be the same person, or people, that are with this young person through these really important teenage years. Teenage years are hard enough for all of us without having the addition of substance use in your home. That's been a really important factor.

Some of the older Routes people enjoy being peer mentors for the younger ones. There are a lot of chats with maybe 18-year-olds with some of the 14 year olds, saying, yes, I went through a period of that. I've got through it. There is some peer mentoring that goes on, but don't get me wrong, some of the older ones are definitely not wanting to hang out with the 12 year olds, so it's all really working out who is comfortable with who, so there is a lot of that in Routes. We make sure that everyone feels comfortable with whoever they are with. Yes, there's a lot of manoeuvring when you are organising trips with the different age groups and things. It's more of a positive than a minus but there are definitely things you need to think about when you are planning.

Rebecca:

You mentioned the report, If it wasn't for Routes, which looks at the project over the years and the research that's come out of it. Obviously, the plan is that we want Routes to be, if we lived in a magical world, we want it to be available across Scotland. In this report, there are quite a few different themes that are represented. There's growth, there's the impact on the whole family, relationships comes out quite a lot in terms of building and keeping relationships. You spoke about building trust and how long it can take, but at soon as you've got the trust, it's there. Can you talk about the bits and pieces from the report that really stick out the most? I know you've already spoke a good bit about Routes itself, and even the stuff that you're saying, it really matches what's in the report itself, but can you talk a wee bit about those themes? Maybe what's really coming out for young people?

Claire:

I know I'm banging on about it a lot, but I think that the relationship is the most important thing about Routes, and it being very person-centred. Different workers will work with different young people that they bond with. It's not like: this is your worker, so you've got them. We really listen to the young person, and the relationship is really key for it working.

The other part you mentioned is the whole family: we have really good relationships with our young person's families. We are very much the young person's worker, but it's important that the family are included so we do some family activities as well. We've got a Christmas party planned. We take some mums and young people to the Recovery Walk. We know the family really well, parents will text us if there are any issues, or phone us if they need any support. We are there with foodbank parcels if families are struggling, we apply to Cash4Kids for supermarket vouchers, and at Christmastime we have a pilot with toy banks and things, so we do as much as we can for the whole family.

We also signpost family members if they are looking for support, so it's supporting the young person but the family is also really important to us. I think the relationship of the project is so important because that's what can change the outcome for young people, that they might have otherwise taken, for a lot of our young people suffer from anxiety or depression, and they can just sort of want to hide away. We can advocate for the young person. There are quite a few who were school refusers and we can be a link between school and the young person if they say I can come in part time, or I can come in if you are in school, because we do school drop-ins as well. On days when we know they are there, we might take them to school or we might get them at lunchtimes if that's a particularly anxiety-provoking time for them. And there's a lot of communication between us, schools and social work and the young person, so we are a bit of a bridge sometimes for that.

I think it's really important that young people have the belief that they can achieve something because many people just don't think that they have any skills or that they are able to achieve anything, so for us, it's about widening their horizons and making them believe in themselves because we definitely believe in them. We might take them to Skills Development Scotland to look at the different options of college courses or, as I mentioned before, take them to college, to let them know that there are student advisors, it's not such a bit step up from school, there are places you can go to in college if you are struggling. There are some brilliant care-experienced advisors in college, so we make links with them. Quite a few of our young people have struggled with college, they are just starting just now, and we will contact the college to let them know that they are struggling, otherwise they might just have dropped out. The colleges have all been brilliant, they are understanding what's going on. I think that's been a massive learning curve for us: as the young people have got older, how easy it is for young people to drop out of the system and all they needed was a little bit of support and for someone to believe in them. That's been really important for us and also really rewarding because you can see that, actually,

maybe this is really going to change what happens to this young person. It's a real privilege to be able to make a difference to a young person, because you see every day the difference that you can make. One of the most rewarding things about working with Routes is connecting young people. They have made some amazing friendships because they don't have to worry about anyone finding out about what's going on at home. They don't have to hide anything. They don't feel like they're going to be judged. That's made some really strong friendships that have been built over the last 3 years. They love going on activities together and they love to meet without us and hang out together. It's been really amazing that part of it, because I think many of them thought that they were the only person in their whole school who was going through something like that. That's a brilliant part of Routes I think - I am biased, but yes.

Rebecca:

No, I think it really shows you when you read through this report, it's almost the difference support can make, having that stability in a young person's life of somebody that they can turn to for help and how much it can change everything. Just before we finish up, we are going to share some of the young people's own voices and what Routes means to them, but I think you've already spoken highly about what it means to be a Routes worker, the privilege that you spoke about there. You've really been there since the beginning of it all, so what does it mean to you as a staff member supporting the Routes young people? You've won an award for it - you won Employee of the Year, so it's clear that you're making a big impact.

Claire:

Thanks for that, Rebecca! I'll try not to cry like I did when I got the award, but I do actually cry quite a lot when I talk about what Routes means to me because it is, without sounding totally cheesy - it's hard not to - but I do think it's such a privilege to see the difference that you can make to these amazing young people's lives by just giving them a bit of support and a bit of stability. It is a massive privilege to work every day with these great young people. I sound like Mary Poppins, sometimes I want to kill them, but generally they are amazing. It is a lovely job, yes, it's just great to have the opportunity to turn round some of the outcomes for these young people who really deserve it. Like I said before, it's hard enough being a teenager these days, it was a long time ago for me to remember that, but I know how hard it is, but I know they've got more obstacles than most to get through their teenage years into adulthood, and whatever support we can give them I think is brilliant.

I am really proud of the Routes project, and I'm just delighted to be a part of it.

Rebecca:

And we have Jess here with us. I think you joined in June or July of this year, and you are a Routes Support Assistant. Claire spoke a lot about how she was there at the beginning and how it came about, but you came in, and you've been listening in to this podcast as well, to what Claire was saying, but do you want to share a bit about how you've been there for the last few months and what it means to you as a support assistant for Routes, and what it's been like working there in the role?

Jess:

Yes, absolutely, thanks, Rebecca. As someone who has come into the project three-years in, seeing it really established, it's been wonderful actually to step into a role that's been solely created for the benefit of young people. What a luxury it is that Claire and the other people who developed the project have created a role for myself and my new colleagues to step into where we can direct our whole attention to the young people, to find really who they want to be and find the moment to help them to

thrive. Who can say that that's their job? To solely look at a young person and support them through whatever they need in the moment, in a time when so many young people are being missed by systems, through no fault of any professional, but so many young people are being missed in the system, yet we have that luxury to be able to nurture young people and be whoever they need us to be in the moment.

There are no words to describe how it feels to have a young person trust you; someone who has been through so much and who doesn't necessarily trust many of the professionals in their life, because they've been through so much, but when that young person finally turns to you and says, 'Okay, yes. I'll go out with you.' Or, 'Actually, yes, I'd like you to help me with that.' Or when they come solely for your help, there are no words to describe how that feels. It's truly amazing to know that you're making a difference on such a deep level. It's fantastic.

Young People:

And now we hear from some of our young people.

'I like Routes because no one ever shouts at you and you've always got a place to go. Even if you're just having a low day, you've always got someone to talk to.'

'Routes is a good place to go to because it's a safe place and you can get support with stuff and meet people who might be going through the same stuff or similar stuff.'

'I like to go to Routes because all the adults are dead loving and dead supportive. All the kids have just all made friends and it's one big family.'

'I go to Routes because staff are really supportive and I don't go to any other group due to the fact that I have anxiety, and it's just good to know that everyone's there for the same reason.'

'It's really good in case you just want to get out for a while.'

'I think of fun and a place where you can actually feel safe and understand people from the group that are either going through similar things, it doesn't have to be the exact same things, you could go through similar things. I feel like in a few years' time, I could look back and think that these were the best days of my teenage life, being in Routes, and probably the happiest of memories from here.'

Interview Ends

We are here to support you if you are concerned about someone else's alcohol or other drug use. We can chat, offer listening support and information, and link you either into our own services or services local to you.

Contact our helpline on 0808 0101011. Email is: helpline@sfad.org.uk. Or you can use the webchat on our website, at www.sfad.org.uk.