



Apollo Health
Innovations

The Plymouth Lighthouse Project



Impact Report
May 2021

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Disclaimer:



This report presents the findings of an independent impact evaluation of the Plymouth Lighthouse Project conducted by Apollo Health Innovations Ltd. The impact evaluation was funded by the South West Academic Health Science Network on behalf of the Plymouth Lighthouse Project (PLP). The report findings are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Plymouth Lighthouse Project or the South West Academic Health Science Network.

Acknowledgements:



We would like to thank the staff and residents at the Plymouth Lighthouse Project for their participation in this evaluation.

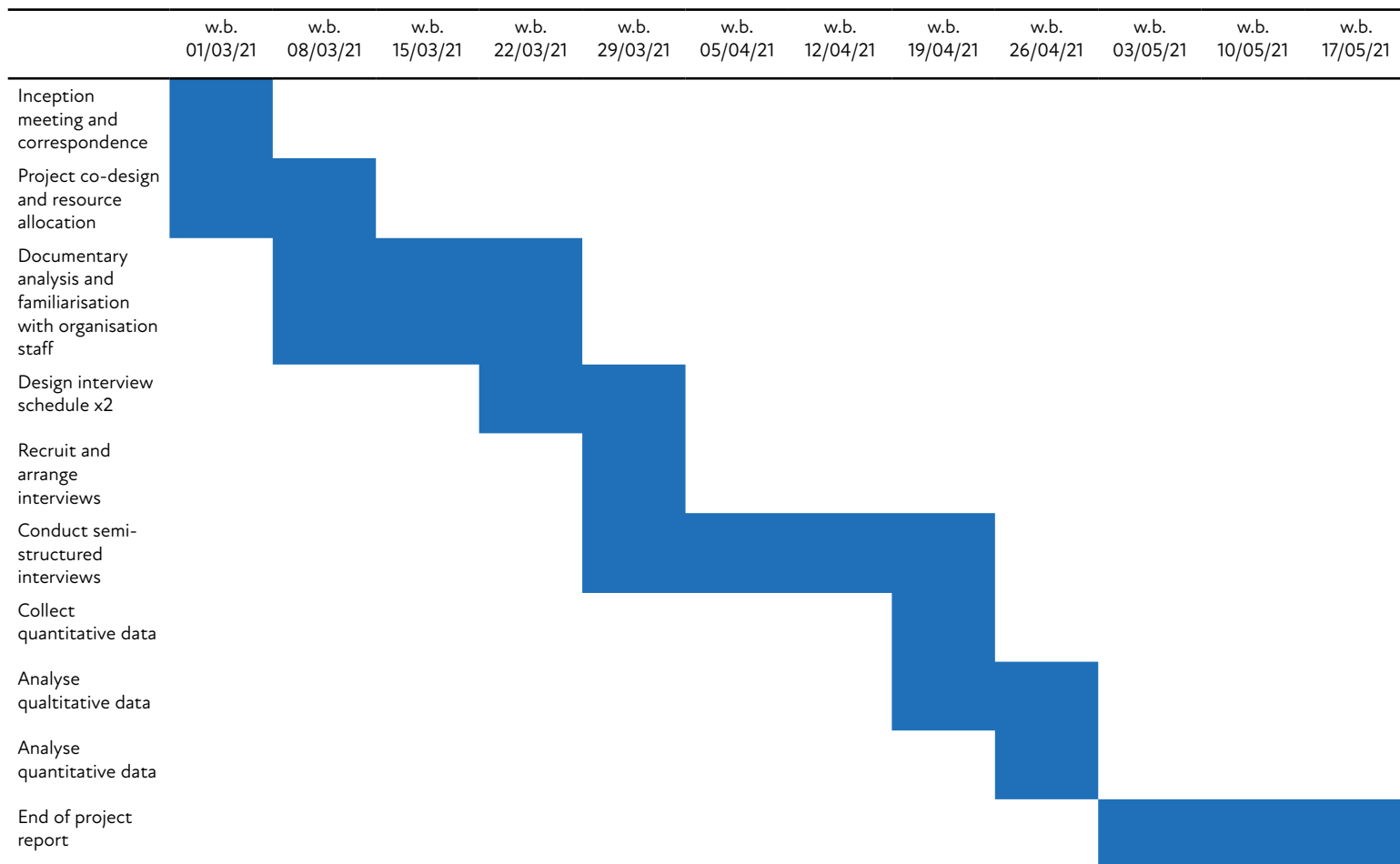
Introduction

This report details the findings of an independent impact evaluation of the [Plymouth Lighthouse Project \(PLP\)](#), a supported living accommodation for addicts seeking to maintain abstinence-based recovery in Plymouth, Devon. The impact evaluation was commissioned and funded by the [South West Academic Health Science Network](#) as part of programme of work to identify and spread innovative place-based approaches that may improve the health and well-being of people disproportionately affected by COVID-19.

Methodology

To conduct this impact evaluation, qualitative and quantitative data collection methods were adopted. An initial desk review and documentary analysis was undertaken, alongside discussions with the management team at the project to gain a deeper understanding of the service and its history. Qualitative semi-structured interviews were also undertaken with four residents, two members of staff and one volunteer at the project and analysed using a rapid thematic approach (Vindrola-Padros & Johnson, 2020). Quantitative service usage data was provided by the PLP to the research team and analysed using standard descriptive statistical techniques. A timeline of the evaluation is provided below in Table 1.

Table 1. Timeline of work



Overview of the service

Based in the coastal city of Plymouth, the Plymouth Lighthouse Project (PLP) is a mutual aid recovery community providing supported accommodation for male addicts seeking to maintain abstinence-based recovery. Established following the success of a partner project in Northern Devon ([The Bideford Lighthouse Project](#)), the PLP was established in August 2019 to provide a safe and homely environment to help prepare recovering addicts for a lifetime of recovery.

To establish the project, the PLP initially received support from the Bideford Lighthouse and associates to acquire and rent the project accommodation. The project subsequently received business loans in 2018 and 2020 through [Resonance](#) (a social impact investment company), in order to renovate the accommodation. To support the sustainability of the project, the PLP received a trade-up grant and social entrepreneurial training from [The Rank Foundation](#) in 2019. The project has also received funding from [The National Lottery Community Fund](#) in 2020 to purchase outdoor equipment and activities to support residents of the project to access the health and wellbeing benefits of nature.

What is mutual aid recovery?

At its most simple level, mutual aid can be described as people with similar experiences helping each other to manage or overcome issues. In terms of addiction recovery, mutual aid is based around groups of like minded individuals who come together to form networks of support.

There are many models of mutual aid with varying approaches and designs. The most widely available and accessed support groups are based on the 12-Step principles (e.g. Narcotics Anonymous, Alcoholics Anonymous and Cocaine Anonymous etc.). These support groups are based in locations throughout the UK and all over the world. They are free to attend and are open to anyone who has a desire for recovery from any type of addiction. Historically, 12-step groups were conducted in person with groups varying in size from less than ten individuals in some localities, to over 100 individuals per group in some of the larger cities of the UK and overseas.

Does mutual aid recovery ‘work’?

There is clear evidence that mutual aid is effective by ‘enhancing motivation for recovery, helping members to reconstruct a positive identity, improving coping skills and through the positive effects of altruism’ (DoH 2017, 78). According to NICE, there is good evidence that engaging in 12-step mutual aid recovery positively impacts substance misuse outcomes for recovering addicts (NICE, 2007; NICE, 2011). In particular, the UK Guidelines on Clinical Management for Drug Misuse and Dependence (DoH, 2017) demonstrate that:

‘Participation in mutual-aid groups is associated with improved long-term recovery rates, improved functioning across a range of domains, and a reduction in post-recovery costs to society. The risk of relapse following recovery initiation rises in relation to the density of drug users in the post-treatment social network and declines in tandem with social network support for abstinence’ (DoH 2017, 78)

More active engagement with mutual aid groups (for example, attending meetings at least weekly, committing to a group, helping others or becoming a sponsor) has been shown to increase positive recovery outcomes and improve subjective psychological well-being (Weiss et al, 2005; De Lucia et al, 2016).

Most attendees of mutual aid support groups work through the 12-Steps of recovery with a sponsor. Sponsors within 12-Step recovery are a type of mentor who are (often) further in their recovery journey than the sponsee. Finding a sponsor in the first three months of engaging in mutual aid recovery has been shown to positively impact on recovery outcomes (Wendt et al, 2017). However, as with forming any type of close personal connection with another person, the requirement for a high level of honesty, openness and mutual trust between a sponsor and sponsee in 12-Step recovery can make it challenging for some individuals to find a sponsor quickly.

What does the project offer?

Situated in the belief that abstinence based recovery works best when surrounded by like minded individuals who are on their recovery journeys, the PLP provides a “safe and homely environment” where residents can participate and support one another through 12-Step recovery. The PLP signposts residents to healthcare services locally, however the project does not provide any ‘treatment’ or substance misuse rehabilitation services.

Each of the residents at the PLP are responsible for engaging and working on their own recovery programme and are both encouraged and signposted to attend local 12-Step support group meetings regularly three times per week. The project asks residents to join a supportive morning group ‘check-in’ meeting each week day, as well as weekly 1:1 sessions for residents to talk with staff about any difficulties or barriers to their recovery progress.

Who does the project support?

The project currently supports male addicts seeking to maintain abstinence-based recovery. The average age of the residents at the project since it opened is 39 years old, with residents ranging in age from 22 to 59 years old. The majority of current and previous residents are of a white ethnic background. Males of all ethnicities, nationalities and personal circumstances are welcomed at the project.

Creating “*an environment to prepare residents for a lifetime of recovery*”, the project employs strict rules of abstinence for all residents at all times. The PLP requires residents to be abstinent on arrival, with many residents arriving at the project following intensive therapeutic treatment and/or detox support. Mutual aid communities like the PLP therefore aim to provide a supportive environment where recovering addicts can prepare for a lifetime of recovery.

Residential rehabilitation services are usually designed to support addicts to become abstinent through intensive clinical interventions, often via a staged approach. Residential mutual aid communities, like the PLP, provide support for those that have completed detox and the earlier stages of rehabilitation. Acquiring a place at the PLP requires recovering addicts to abstinent from the substances of their addiction, with the project enforcing a strict requirement of abstinence whilst a resident at the project. This requirement of abstinence is a cornerstone of the PLP, as it provides all residents with the best chance of success to prepare for a lifetime of recovery without the

The majority of residents access the PLP via referrals from HM Prisons, the National Probation Service, drug and alcohol services, rehabilitation and treatment facilities or via self-referral. A large number of the residents are local to the South West area prior to their arrival at the PLP, with a small number of residents arriving directly from the Plymouth area. Each resident can stay with the project for up to two years whilst engaging in 12-Step recovery.

The PLP provides an intensive housing management service to its residents. Intensive housing management is a term used to describe the services provided by a supported housing landlord, differentiating it from a general needs landlord. The majority of residents fund their residency at the project via [housing benefit](#) from the UK government. Residents supported by housing benefits also are

required to pay a weekly personal contribution towards their residency each week. Residents can also fully fund their residency at the PLP project themselves if they are in the financial position to do so. The rental income received from residents currently funds and sustains all of the PLP services. As of May 2021, the PLP is able to support and accommodate up to 10 residents seeking abstinence based recovery, with the service proudly supporting over 31 men in their journey to recovery since the project began.

Achievements at a glance

Between the commencement of the project on 5th August 2019 and the time of writing (5th May 2021), the lighthouse project has made seen the following achievements:

31 - number of men supported in their recovery towards life long abstinence

4185 days - combined number of abstinent days of residents whilst at the project

127 days - average duration of stay for a resident

57% - percentage of residents who leave the project abstinent

Impact of the Plymouth Lighthouse Project

What impact does the PLP have on residents?

The PLP is built firmly around the principles of mutual aid, where recovering addicts can live and support each other towards a shared goal of life long recovery. When discussing the impact of the project with the residents at the lighthouse, three key themes emerged as discussed below.

The project as a place of abstinence

The requirement of abstinence, recommendations to attend regular group meetings, engagement with the 12-Steps of recovery, and taking responsibility for the domestic duties of the house provides structure to the day that many residents appreciate. Residents reported the benefits of this structure to their recovery:

- **Maintaining abstinence**

A key positive impact for the residents at the project was helping to provide structure and focus to their day, limiting opportunities to consider relapse. As two residents highlighted:

“[Since living at the Lighthouse Project] this is the longest time in my life I’ve been dry. Ever”

(Resident 1)

"[having structure] helps to keep me clean and sober" (Resident 2)

- **Having a reason to "get out of the bed"**

The daily activities like morning meetings help residents keep up with the daily schedule, stay active, keep busy, and just give the reason to "get out of the bed" (Resident 2):

"I like the structure ...I don't stay in bed all day. I'd maybe just stay in bed this morning and then go to bed late. Having a check-in is a structure... it keeps me engaged with people and helps me reflect on how I'm feeling rather than just sitting on my own." (Resident 2)

At the same time, there is a balance between being too regimented and too free which residents highlight as an advantage of the PLP:

"This is perfect, this [project] is a good balance. I like how [the manager] runs it. He's relaxed, but we still follow rules, there is still this structure...but it's more like relaxed" (Resident 2)

Such a balance creates the basis for trust and develops a sincere and conscious intent to not 'break the rules'.

"This time, finally in my life, I don't want to risk it. I can risk it... but I can't lose everything again." (Resident 1)

It's noteworthy that the gratitude to the house is strongly based on the gratitude to one person – the manager. The faith, trust and support the manager provides to the residents contributes to many of the residents desire to remain in abstinent recovery:

"He is like our dad. He is always busy and taking care of everything. Every time I feel bad, he was always there to help me. He gave me a hand when I really needed it. He trusts me, which I respect. He gave me hope and trust." (Resident 2)

The project as a social and supportive environment

As there are 10 residents living in the house, the Lighthouse Project serves as a social place where residents can feel a part of a supportive recovery community.

- **Communicating with other people**

People communicate with each other daily, which helps them escape loneliness, have someone to talk to, and just feel a part of a community and society.

"being here forces me to speak to people and it's good for me...eventually I'd just shut myself off if I were left with to my own devices" (Resident 2)

"I do benefit a lot from having someone to talk to and having that structure" (Resident 1)

At the same time, as one respondent noted, the atmosphere in the house does not push anyone to communicate or create conditions of "obligatory socialization". Residents are free to engage with other people or to be on their own. As a result, they aren't shut off from the world but can still have enough private space when they need it:

"this place has really helped because it's a safe environment for me...previously I had sort of

removed myself from society... but we're able to kind of engage with society as well because we're not locked in here, we're able to go out and can come back and reflect on our daily experience" (Resident 2)

- **Sharing and getting support**

For some, living at the project is a type of informal "group therapy" (Resident 2), a place to sharing experiences and advice and to share mutual aid:

"If you had money, you could just go to the therapist and tell one person about your problems. But this is a kind of group therapy" (Resident 2)

"This is a group, and it's good for us to share that experience" (Resident 3)

Being among other recovering addicts who have been in similar situations and experiences the same stigma, shame and social isolation that many addicts experiences as a result of their addiction, positively impacts many of the residents recovery journeys:

"Just sharing this experience you get a sense of relief from being able to know that you're not on your own in this, other people feel the same way. Even just building relationships with people" (Resident 3)

"It helps us realize that we're not alone here cuz addictions are really... Isolation. You feel very alone with it, you feel like you're the only person on the planet that feels this way" (Resident 3)

- **Developing the feeling of responsibility**

As well as providing an environment of mutual aid, the project also encourages residents to take responsibility of their personal situation, including taking shared responsibility of the housing environment that they share:

"We've done cleaning every week, so I've got a responsibility. It kind of joins you together with people, you get a responsibility to support others, not just thinking about myself" (Resident 2)

The project as a space to engage in 12-Steps mutual aid recovery

The principles of 12-Step recovery aim to guide recovering addicts through a spiritual journey, helping them to explore and understand their past and make positive changes to improve their future. The ability for the residents to provide each other with mutual aid whilst embarking on their recovery journeys is core to the purpose of the PLP and a clear impact of the project.

- **Engagement with 12-Step recovery**

"Yeah, because I've learned so much while working on the programme. When problems come up in my life, stresses, or things on my mind, whenever I talk to a member of staff, to my sponsor, they always put it in that context, and it relates to it" (Resident 2)

"This is again why this place is so good because it's allowing me to have the time to explore why it all happened" (Resident 3)

"All of my problems that I've had in my life we all in this book, in these 12 steps. Oh, it has to do with that, to do with the resemble, to control situations. Every problem I've had is related to something in the 12 steps programme, so I used it a lot" (Resident 2)

"Helps me understand what is going on" (Resident 2)

- **Benefits of 12-Step recovery**

The 12-Step program is perceived by some residents as a long but effective mechanism to support recovery. Some residents compared their experiences in treatment facilities where the effects of the treatment were short-term on their recovery.

“They’d just give you medication, that sort of thing. You’re trying to explain what’s wrong with you, what’s going in your head, and they think: Oh! That means you need these pills. And then you go away. And it kind of sedates you in a way, but then... These 12 steps, and the big book, describes what’s going on in my head, and you’re like, oh, this is not anything crazy. This is just stuff you need to work out. It’s like giving you a way to understand it” (Resident 2)

- **Support to identify a sponsor**

Identifying a sponsor is a key component of 12-Step recovery for many engaged in a group, as this trusted person often provides vital support, advice, guidance and encouragement to those who they sponsor. Finding and approaching a sponsor can be a daunting experience for many, particularly those who have experienced the social isolation and social stigma that often accompanies addiction.

The project encourages all new residents to attend their first 12-Step support group with a current resident who regularly attends. Once new residents have engaged with one or more 12-Step support groups, the staff and residents at the project encourage and support residents to identify a sponsor and may make recommendations based on their knowledge of the individuals within the local recovery community.

Implications if this service was not available

Residents discussed a number of challenges that they may face if they had not been offered the opportunity to be a resident at the project. Some discussed these challenges in relation to their past experiences of attempting to maintain abstinence without the mutual aid support that the project community provides. Overall, residents described that relapse would be likely for them if they were not a resident at the project. This would often lead to a deterioration in their recovery, their physical and mental health, their relationships with others and their housing status.

- **Relapse**

For many of the residents, being part of a mutual aid recovery community at the PLP had reduced the likelihood or prevented relapse:

“If I were not here, I would probably drink and smoke [drugs]” (Resident 4)

“If I had my own place, there is a chance I would attend meetings and talk to my sponsor, and get support in that way, but I think I’d picked up a drink, or have used drugs by now” (Resident 2)

“I guess if I were still in active addiction, drinking, I’d be dead” (Resident 1)

In some cases, this assumption is rooted in the previous experience and is compared with other projects, rehabs, and clinics the residents had stayed at:

“In most of the [supported housing] that I have lived in, you walk in the door, and you can smell [marijuana]...It’s good that this house sticks to the abstinence rules. That’s rule number one – staying clean” (Resident 1)

It is important to note however that due to the many challenges of addiction, a number of residents have relapsed during their time at the PLP. To ensure the safety of the staff and residents, and to

provide all residents the best opportunities for long term recovery, residents who relapse at the project are required to leave. Relapse does not however preclude a resident from returning to the project in the future if a vacancy is available, the person is currently abstinent and they are committed to their recovery.

- **Mental health**

It is widely accepted that mental health difficulties and addiction (particularly addiction to drugs and/or alcohol) are directly or indirectly connected. The project signposts residents to local mental health support services for those seeking this support, with staff also supporting the residents and encouraging the residents to also support one another. One resident discussed that living at the project had helped him to remain abstinent and engage in a 12-Step support group, enabling him to address some of the mental health challenges he has faced in the past:

“I can see now reflecting back that [my mental health] played a big part in my relapse. I was struggling to cope with anxiety, and depression, and also flashbacks of having been in active addiction for 10 years” (Resident 3)

- **Prison**

One resident discussed that without attending the project, he would have ended up going to prison due to the criminal activities often associated with active drug addiction:

“If I hadn’t made this decision to come down here, and if [the manager] hadn’t accepted me, I would be going to prison” (Resident 4)

- **Homelessness**

Two other residents highlighted that without the project, they would likely experience a drastic worsening of their living conditions, including the potential for homelessness:

“I would be on the street” (Resident 4)

“I dread to think where I would be if I hadn’t come here” (Resident 3)

Prior to arriving at the project, the majority of residents had unstable living conditions or were serving sentences in Her Majesty’s Prisons. It can be difficult for any recovering addict to maintain abstinence if their most basic physiological needs are not met, with housing difficulties often triggering or exacerbating other health inequalities that addicts are more likely to face. The safe, stable and homely environment that the PLP provides to residents helps recovering addicts to meet these most basic physiological needs, providing a solid basis on which to engage in 12-Step recovery and rebuild their lives.

How has Covid-19 affected the Plymouth Lighthouse Project?

Covid-19 has significantly reshaped the ordinary way of life in the project, including the frequency and types of support provided to residents and the number of opportunities and activities residents could engage with. Common areas of impact from Covid-19 included:

- **Reshaping the core delivery of 12-Step support groups**

Since the pandemic, all regular 12-Step meetings have been moved online and delivered via video call. One of the managers at the project highlighted:

“There was a big adjustment because all group meetings came to an end, so that was challenging because the whole of our model depends on it, but it still went online and worked” (Manager)

Those involved in 12-Step support groups also often meet each other outside of the meetings in a “cafe culture”, with residents prior to the pandemic often meeting others in recovery outside of the house. As a manager explained:

“A lot of the 12-step culture is around a cafe culture. People meeting out in the cafes and stuff like that. So it was tricky for the guys to really get involved with the wider recovery community which is one of the main things they meant to do” (Manager)

- **New opportunities for widening outreach**

At the same time, moving 12-Step support group meetings online during the pandemic has increased opportunities for recovering addicts to support one another all over the world:

“On the other hand, once the online thing was going, people were suddenly able to attend meetings from all over the world, which was very interesting. That was an extraordinary experience” (Manager)

- **Additional expenditure**

To cope up with the changes and ensure the continuous engagement of the residents with the 12-Steps programme, the organisation was spend extra resources to purchase digital devices and tables for the residents:

“We used some of the grant money to provide every room with a table so that they can do online meetings” (Manager)

- **Less frequent presence of staff in the house**

As there was a significant confusion for everyone in UK when the pandemic began, the staff attended the house less frequently compared to the pre-pandemic period to reduce the likelihood of disease transmission:

“We didn’t know how to cope at first. We didn’t know whether we were coming in to work or not. I started coming 3 days a week...It was quite a shock” (Manager)

- **Impacts to health and wellbeing**

Lockdown had a negative impact on the health and wellbeing of some of the residents. One of the residents highlighted that the closing of gyms had a detrimental impact on his wellbeing:

“I’ve been keeping active when it was open (gym), and when it shut, I just got lazy again” (Resident 2)

Importantly however, the shared living space and mutual aid that residents provide one another at the project reduced the isolating impact of the Covid-19 lockdowns for them. This is in opposition to many of the wider community, particularly those who live alone, whose wellbeing suffered due to the isolation of the national lockdowns.

- **Limited number of volunteering activities**

Due to the lockdown, the number of opportunities and voluntary activities residents could be involved in was limited. Residents are encouraged to participate in voluntary opportunities to help structure their day, increase their sense of purpose whilst in recovery and to foster a sense of satisfaction and reward for giving back to the community. Residents discussed how not being able to engage in these voluntary opportunities was frustrating:

“Because of the lockdown there has not been as many [voluntary] opportunities...I’m confident that if there wasn’t a lockdown, we’d been hearing of a lot more opportunities” (Resident 2)

Areas for improvement



Whilst the discussions with the residents were overwhelmingly positive and complimentary of the project, some residents highlighted areas that would improve the project for them.

One resident felt that staff should intervene and play a greater role in conflict resolution when there are incidents between the residents. Conflict and personality clashes are common in any cohabiting environment and any serious incidents are resolved in collaboration with the staff and residents.

A second resident felt that having a pet dog at the house would be beneficial for the wellbeing of the resident

Finally, one resident felt that the project could be publicised more widely so that other addicts seeking abstinence based recovery could apply to join the project:

Wider awareness: “Like I said, years ago I didn’t know things like this exist. This is the advantage of knowing there are places like this” (Resident 2)

It must be noted however that the project is currently full and has a continuous waiting list.

What is the future for the Plymouth Lighthouse Project

The PLP has gone from strength to strength since opening its doors in August 2019 and has ambitions to continually grow and improve its services. The immediate priority for the project is to purchase the accommodation to secure the future of the project. The project is in the final stages of creating a Community Benefit Society to purchase the building through the sale of shares to individuals interested in supporting the project.

Once the current accommodation for males has been purchased, the PLP aims to purchase a second accommodation in the Plymouth area and open a sister project for women seeking the support of a mutual aid community.

Finally, the process of reflecting on past achievements as part of this impact report has helped the PLP to structure future strategic ambitions in relation to the ongoing evaluation and quality improvement of the service. The project seeks to conduct more in-depth research and evaluation to understand the extent to which residing at a mutual aid recovery community can 1) reduce the health inequalities faced by individuals with addictions and 2) impact the short and long term recovery outcomes of addicts who attend and go on to leave the project.

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