

# Informing the Development of The Blue Sky Centre, Coventry and Warwickshire's Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC)

## The Problem

A Sexual Assault Referral Centre, or SARC, is a one stop location where victims of rape, sexual abuse and serious sexual assault can receive medical care and support. Through work to improve services for victims in Coventry and Warwickshire, partners deemed it necessary to establish a SARC for the region.

Adopting a different approach to other SARC developments, The Coventry and Warwickshire Sexual Assault Strategic Board, comprising Warwickshire County Council, Warwickshire Police, Coventry City Council and the Arden Cluster NHS (Coventry & Warwickshire) commissioned Coventry University to conduct a piece of research identifying the needs of victims of sexual assault to inform the development of the new centre, thereby aiming to create a victim informed and client-led SARC.

## The Solution and Approach

Over a six month period in 2011, Coventry University's Psychology and Behavioural Sciences Department conducted research designed to investigate the experiences of sexual assault victims in the local area and to identify the needs of potential future victims. The research focused on victim's experiences of the assault, along with the responses that they received from services in the wake of the assault.

The research highlighted a number of victim specific needs that should be addressed in order to enhance the response to victims of rape and sexual assault and to encourage future reporting of assaults. The findings revealed that victims had previously received an inadequate response from service providers, highlighting the need to improve medico-legal responses to sexual assault victims and to respond to victims in a non-judgmental and sensitive manner. These negative experiences were reported to have had a significant impact on victim's quality of life, with many experiencing deterioration in mental health and emotional wellbeing, changes to their social and occupational

life and often being repeat victimised at some point in their lives. The research findings were used to directly inform the development of the SARC in terms of building design and logistics, the information included in the SARC website and literature, and the way in which staff are specifically trained to approach/respond to victims.

There are several specific design features that are unique to the Coventry and Warwickshire SARC including the fact that it is the first centre nationally to include age-appropriate waiting rooms for victims. Waiting and examination rooms in the centre are designed to make victims feel at ease and there is a shower room and post-shower room that are laid out to ensure 'forward' progression in the centre, to ensure that the victim never has to 'go back' – an important psychological feature when recovering from trauma. This SARC is also unique in having a garden relaxation area.

As a result of the work, police officers and other front-line staff in Coventry and Warwickshire are now encouraged to approach sexual assault cases with a better understanding and appreciation of victim psychology. The centre has facilities for forensic evidence recovery and police interviewing of victims where appropriate. SARC staff ensure that victims are referred to appropriate agencies for follow-up support/care after the initial assault.

## The Benefits

The research conducted to inform the SARC development served its purpose to provide victims with a voice, which has contributed directly to a change in the underpinning philosophy that dictates the way sexual violence victims are responded to in Coventry and Warwickshire.

The Blue Sky Centre, which opened in April 2013, supported more clients within the first 3 months than was predicted for the first year of opening. Encouragingly, approximately 25% of clients using the centre in the first 9 months are self-referrals. It has received praise from both service users and professionals who have utilised the centre. The joined-up service that victims are now receiving is intended to improve the overall medico-legal response to victims of sexual assault which should in turn help to reduce the potential negative impact of the assault on victim quality of life, thereby contributing to the overall process of victim recovery.

