



INNOVATION AGENCY
Academic Health Science Network
for the North West Coast

THE LIFE ROOMS

Summary

A new approach to delivering health, wellbeing and community services in Merseyside has seen three new community hubs open in four years with over 80,000 visits.

Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust opened the first Life Rooms in a former public library in Walton in 2014 with funding from the Innovation Agency. The Life Rooms is a community space providing access to health services, employment and housing advice and support, and social, community and volunteering opportunities.

A second Life Rooms was opened in Southport in 2017, and a third was opened in Bootle in 2019.

Background

Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust serves a population of over 11 million people across 85 sites in the North West of England. The trust delivers specialist inpatient and community services supporting mental health, learning disabilities, addiction, brain injuries and physical health.



In a 2014 consultation, Mersey Care service users identified a number of barriers to recovery. Service users reported struggling with obstacles to 'moving on', including poor housing, lack of access to employment and social isolation. Alongside this, service users and carers identified the lack of community space to access support and meet other people.

How The Life Rooms work

Visitors to The Life Rooms are able to access advice and services for a number of different practical and social issues, including employment, physical and mental wellbeing, and money and housing. Funding from the Innovation Agency allowed the creation of an employment and enterprise hub.

Visitors are helped by Pathways Advisors, a new role that was created within The Life Rooms. The Pathways Advisors greet visitors and signpost them according to their needs.

Since their creation The Life Rooms have established relationships with over 100 partner organisations across Merseyside, providing access to support and activities in the community. This social prescribing model, based on each hub's local environment and local people's needs, has become an essential component of The Life Rooms model.

By spring 2019 The Life Rooms had received over 4,000 registrations for Mersey Care's Recovery College, which provides courses to help people understand and manage mental distress as well as physical health, and access to social and creative opportunities.



My story

Sean Masterson, aged 28 and from Walton, came to Walton Life Rooms in 2018. Following the death of his grandfather, for whom he was a carer, Sean was suffering with depression and anxiety. After referral to a mental health clinic he was also diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome: "I felt angry a lot and frustrated. I came to The Life Rooms while still being assessed. It was like a crossroads really, waiting to see what happened. When I got my diagnosis I was already here doing courses with the Recovery College. I realised I needed to stop feeling sorry for myself.

"The Life Rooms isn't far from where I live. I don't need to mess around getting buses and trains, it's a five minute walk. They were doing things that interested me and kept me occupied. I did creative writing, a stand-up comedy course, and I learned about depression and anxiety.

"Through the Recovery College I gained a sense of achievement. I started to feel better about myself.

I could say I've come to a class today, I've sat through it, I've learned something. The stand-up course was great. I've always enjoyed comedy and then I was doing it. I got to the point where I was co-facilitating the class, then in the last three months I've been going into town and doing gigs.

"After I'd been here a few months one of the facilitators asked if I wanted to be a volunteer. I signed up to do it, and I haven't looked back since. It's an amazing place, it's probably saved my life."



Benjamin Harris, 37, is a Recovery Learning Facilitator at Southport Life Rooms. He started his journey with The Life Rooms as a service user after being diagnosed with psychotic depression: "The Life Rooms was a revelation. It provided an environment where I could just be myself with my issues, talk about them and learn from other people. It's almost group therapy, and isn't really offered anywhere else.

"Through the Recovery College I went to an activity called Journeys through Film. Because I felt so anxious at the time that's all I could really do, just go to that once a month and watch a film. After a few times I actually started to participate in discussions. I started going to other Recovery College classes: understanding psychosis, understanding depression, managing anxiety. There was creative writing, comedy.

I also made use of the more holistic activities like help with benefits and volunteering opportunities.

"What I see now as a facilitator is people coming to The Life Rooms and opening up more. It's empowering to realise there's more to yourself than just a diagnosis. People's confidence grows, they have a routine.

"You used to have to rely on places like the council one-stop-shop or the Citizen's Advice Bureau, but if you've got a mental health condition you might be too anxious to go to a place like that and interact with people.

The Life Rooms provides all of that in a safe and understanding environment. It was quite isolating to be a service user before The Life Rooms. It's a refuge for a lot of people."

21 year old **Molly Maguire** heard about Bootle Life Rooms through her community psychiatric nurse while receiving treatment for Emotionally Unstable Personality Disorder (EUPD): "At first I was a bit nervous, but I started with doing arts and crafts and I made a good few friends from that. I went on to do courses like understanding anxiety, understanding depression, understanding psychosis. They've helped me understand more about symptoms, coping strategies – it's helped me so much.

"I've also been able to access volunteering. I'm going to start volunteering here at The Life Rooms, which I'm really excited about. If you'd told me six months ago I'd be doing something like volunteering I never would have thought it would be something I'd do. I wouldn't leave the house, but now I'm doing it, it's changed me. Before The Life Rooms I couldn't even go to the shops. It's got me out, it's got me on buses which I never thought I'd be doing.

"I'm starting a beauty therapy course at Hugh Baird College soon which I'm excited about. I found the course through the pathway adviser here. I'm still receiving treatment but I've seen a change, and I think my psychiatric nurse has as well. It's been amazing coming here, it's changed me a lot. Without The Life Rooms I think I'd still be in the same place I was. It's a calm atmosphere, everyone's understanding – I call it my safe place."

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