

## **The First Step (formerly Knowsley Domestic Violence Support Services – KDVSS)**

Imagine there are two options. Option 1: take on a challenge that is almost guaranteed to be wildly unpopular in certain quarters. Option 2: stay in the mainstream and work to improve things within the limits of the existing system. Each has its merits: which way would you go?

Back in the mid 1990's the borough of Knowsley was unusual in not having an agency that specialised in supporting victims of domestic abuse. Then in 1996 newly registered charity The First Step (formerly Knowsley Domestic Violence Support Service - KDVSS) started work and began to explore what people who lived in the borough and were affected by domestic abuse might want or need. Systematic research was undertaken in partnership with Edge Hill College to inform the content of applications for funding. By 1999 outreach work was going on and The First Step launched the Merseyside Zero Tolerance campaign at Liverpool Football Club Academy in Kirby.

There was a great start to the new millennium with an award for The First Step from the Safer Merseyside Partnership and funding from St Helens & Knowsley Health Authority for multi-agency domestic abuse training courses for more than 300 staff. Then there came a big challenge. Knowsley did not have a refuge – a safe place to which women and their children could escape from violence and abuse at home – and just such a place was clearly needed.

In 2001 the proposals for a refuge were presented: not to a universal welcome. In 2002 outreach expanded to include education programmes in primary schools and community based sessions for children and their non-abusive parent. Funding bids to refurbish St Martins Church Hall into a First Step centre were successful but there was still a need for a refuge.

Partnership with Arena Housing in 2003 finally saw work commence on a purpose designed refuge while The First Step education programmes were inspected by Ofsted and entered into their 'Book of Good Practice'.

Finally in 2005 both the First Step Centre and the refuge were officially opened.

How do you follow 10 years of ground breaking work? Well The First Step has done it by continuing to break new ground.

There have been ups and downs. Awards won, pioneering longitudinal research undertaken and accreditations gained. Funding cuts, redundancies and domestic abuse is not yet a thing of the past. In the year 2012/13 The First Step delivered over 500 group support sessions and nearly 1000 1 to 1 sessions in the refuge to support women and 220 sessions to support children.

Angela Cholet has been at the helm of The First Step since the very beginning. Her team and she share a view that we need to see the person not a problem and that the services developed by The First Step need to be good quality as the women and children of Knowsley deserve no less. Domestic abuse is something of a 'Cinderella' issue which can be seen as affecting 'others' as opposed to affecting 'us'; anti social behaviour or substance abuse can be regarded as affecting society in general whereas domestic abuse tends to be behind closed doors.

Thankfully The First Step: Angela, the staff, volunteers and trustees all stand for the survivors and for the victims.

If you say to Angela 'that's brave' she'll look you in the eye and reply 'no, moving on from what the women and children survive – that's brave". She's not wrong and you know what else? It is also truly inspiring.

'Kites rise highest against the wind – not with it' Sir Winston Churchill