



# Aven House, Walsall

---

## Contact:

Angee Jenkins, Scheme  
Manager

[Angee.Jenkins@caldmorehousing.co.uk](mailto:Angee.Jenkins@caldmorehousing.co.uk)

## Artists:

Catherine Tarbuck and Keith  
Bloomfield

## PRIMARY OUTCOME FOR AVEN HOUSE:

Develop health and arts  
sector awareness of  
the value of using the  
arts to engage with  
communities

## OTHER OUTCOMES FOR THE PROJECT:

Access communities in  
the Black Country

Engage and involve  
participants in ongoing  
activity

Develop confidence  
among participants

Aven House is a safe refuge providing emergency accommodation for women and children under threat of abuse and violence. It is a Government-funded charity, which has to fundraise to provide activities for the women.

The project was undertaken with a group of four to eight women (depending on attendance) at the refuge. Six *What is Happiness?* workshops were held between 15<sup>th</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> June 2009. Ages ranged from 17 to 34 years.

## What is Happiness?

---

### Attendance and Initial Response

The artists created posters to advertise the workshops to put up around the house and help staff promote the project. The Scheme Manager said that the 8-10 women who signed up were at first dubious and the artists found it difficult at times to give instructions to the group, as a number of mothers had children aged 2 or under with them. The initial sessions were described by the artists as “chaotic”, with lots of participants popping in and out.

However despite this, there was a lot of discussion and the women began to work in earnest, drawing out their thoughts and ideas of happiness and engaging with the process. The artists reported that:

*“Everyone stayed longer than the workshop time slot, which we thought was a very positive start to the project as a whole”.*

The Scheme manager said that the women were “*raring to go*”, beginning to discuss feelings and interacting with each other, taking ownership of their houses and ideas.

## The Process

The Scheme Manager said that the women really enjoyed the process and that the artists were incredibly flexible, doing a great job in bringing out confidence in women who had more ability than they were able to acknowledge. Their preparatory work ensured that the women had the materials and tools to enable them to carry on working on their houses in the evenings, so making up for some lost time in sessions. This was a very suitable arrangement, as the children were in bed and so the women found it relaxing to paint and draw – some of them working until 10 or 11pm at night. They commented:

*“The artists have been brilliant at helping me put my ideas into words and pictures”*

## Challenges

The artists found the workshops challenging at times due to the spaces available and the necessity of working in communal areas, disruptions, negotiations around staff availability, conflicts between some women and the need for childcare during the sessions. Also, due to the diverse range of women and the transient nature of the families staying at the refuge, it was difficult to

maintain numbers and commitment with all but a few.

The Scheme Manager is aware of the practical constraints and would put alternative arrangements into place on any future project (eg. using rooms and childcare at a local Sure Start Centre, changing timing of sessions and promoting the project more).

The Scheme manager felt that having a male artist on the team provided a crucial positive role model for the women, as their experience of men had largely been negative. The artists agreed to do an extra final session that made up for the lost time accrued over the weeks which, according to the Scheme Manager, the women really appreciated. The artists reported that this session was *“relaxed...with everyone finishing off their artwork”*.

The artists observed that the women worked hard and took a lot of pride in their artwork. The women were not able to attend the Happiness Exhibition launch, but came to see the houses on a separate occasion as a small group, and were thrilled to see their work exhibited in a public space. The Walsall Happiness Houses will also be exhibited at The New Art Gallery in the Walsall Wellbeing Festival 2010.



## Benefits

The artists said they received very positive feedback from the participants, with people wanting to take part in more art projects and even a family project in the future. The Scheme Manager identified that through the project the women had learned a range of artistic skills as well as enabling them to express feelings, wishes, hopes and fears in order to create an understanding of individual happiness. One woman realised her hidden talents because her strengths had been nurtured and 'invested in' by the artists who, it was clear, wanted her to succeed. Another (heavily pregnant) woman talked of her aspirations, asking the artists to take photographs of her artwork so that she could put it in a portfolio and use it to apply for an art course after she had given birth. She also returned to finish painting her house soon after having her baby. Clearly the project did much to increase the women's self esteem, pride and confidence:



Another important development was increased social interaction between the women. Even though the project was perceived as challenging the group work brought them together, with the four main participants becoming good friends by the end. The Scheme Manager said she didn't expect the women to embrace the project so much, saying she felt extremely proud of them.

She noted that the women:

*"I love it – isn't it exciting – I can't believe this is my work"*

*"began to understand each others' ideas... identified new interests...motivated each other... (and)...developed a real sense of ownership of their work".*

---

## Conclusion

Aven House has been involved in arts activities with professional artists before, as the Director is very passionate and supportive of the arts. However the Scheme Manager felt that this project was unique because it was extremely *“thought provoking”*.

It was led by the women and exploring issues on an individual and group basis

(rather than involvement in art for arts sake).

The staff members were also unaware of some of the issues raised and realised that in some respects they didn't know their client group as much as they thought they did.

They recognise that they sometimes overlook the everyday things which make the women happy (eg. being able to have a cigarette when they want).

The Scheme Manager now feels the staff team have something to build upon and that this new information and understanding will be extremely valuable to them in planning pragmatic sessions within the house:

*“Thank you – the ladies have had a wonderful time and it has been fantastic to see the ownership taken and realisation of some of the more simple and reachable things which can equate to happiness”*

