

CALABASH AT GEORGE HOUSE TRUST

Innovating to support HIV positive African men in the North West

Identifying the need

Calabash is an extension of previous work by GHT to support families. This work had revealed specific issues for African men, who were less likely than women to approach GHT services, sometimes perceiving them as being solely for mothers. African men are often stereotyped and marginalised. Calabash aims to address this by promoting positive change; improving mental and physical health; and so developing parenting skills and abilities.

In September 2011, George House Trust (GHT) received a two year grant from the Henry Smith Charitable Trust to provide this highly innovative service, focussed on HIV positive African men/fathers.

Calabash uses a combination of group work and one to one sessions to support HIV positive African men on a range of issues such as: HIV diagnosis; immigration; poverty and destitution; disclosure; employment advice; adherence to medication and so on. The project is led by an African man and supported by a group of HIV positive male African volunteers.

How we support our clients

Calabash currently supports 55 HIV positive African men. Many of the men have multiple partners and key to the success of the project is its encouragement of them to be open about this in order to best manage these lifestyle choices.

| Workshop topic | Number attending |
|---|------------------|
| Introduction to self-employment | 17 |
| HIV Treatment information | 15 |
| Social space event | 13 |
| Confidence, assertiveness and managing stress | 12 |
| Immigration issues | 12 |
| HIV experience Africa* | 11 |
| Sex and relationships | 8 |
| Healthy eating for people living with HIV | 8 |
| Emotional wellbeing workshop | 5 |
| Memory book workshop* | 5 |

*hosted by VSO scholar attached to GHT.

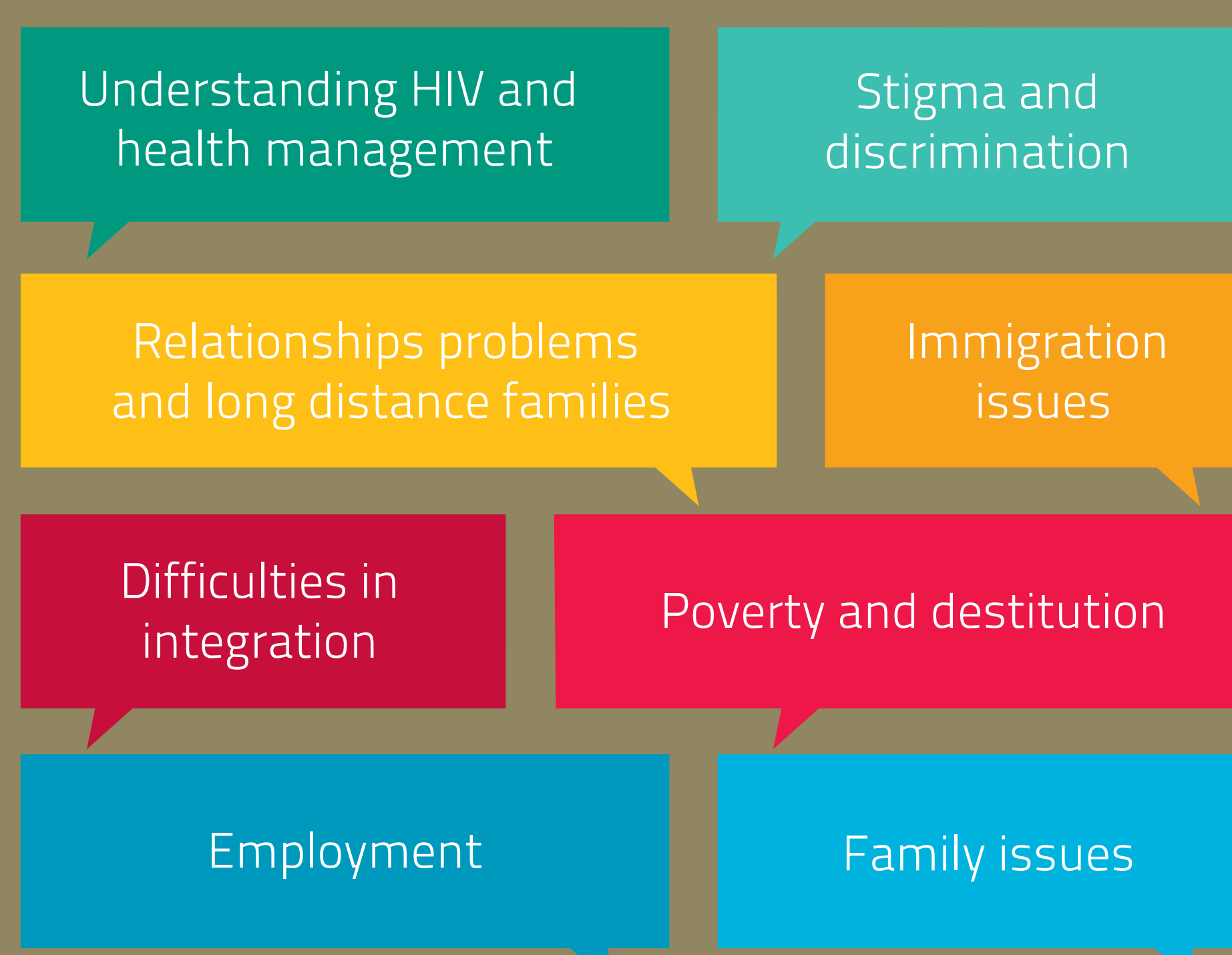
Workshops and one to one sessions

The work with the service users has included over 150 one-to-one sessions and a programme of workshop sessions. Ten sessions have been held so far, with future sessions on domestic violence planned. Table 1 shows the topics covered in the workshops to date and the number of service users attending.

The table shows that the session on setting up in business was the best attended. This has been influential in how the project has developed, as focussing on these issues has been an effective way of encouraging African men to attend the service.

"I really enjoyed learning how to start a business and go about starting a self employment business."
"I found the information to be useful all-round as I did not have any idea at all on how to start a business."

Key issues for service users from one to one sessions and the workshops:



Reflective residential weekend: 'my life path living with HIV'

The main purpose of the weekend was to explore feelings and confidence in living with HIV. It was also a means of measuring the impact the workshops had on the eight African men who attended. Evaluations were positive and indicated that the work of Calabash had had a positive impact on the confidence, resilience and knowledge of service users.

"It was quite an experience. Everyone was free to talk about their life with HIV. I really enjoyed it."
"At the end of the weekend it felt like we were family."
"I was surprised at how much I trusted the other men and felt able to talk about personal issues."

Conclusions

Calabash has been successful in engaging hard to reach and marginalised HIV positive African men. It is a ground breaking and highly innovative project. It accepts their lifestyle choices and encourages them to be open about them in order to improve health outcomes. Key to its success has been its willingness to adapt and innovate to reach those whose experience of stigma makes them unwilling to approach HIV services.