

## **Avenue – an overview**

### **Introduction**

Avenue is a charity in the North East of Scotland that supports families and individuals, with a focus on children, relationships and wellbeing. We provide a range of services to encourage personal growth, strengthen relationships, promote family wellbeing, support children and enable healthy environments for all. We are working towards a world in which happy, healthy people enjoy harmonious and respectful interactions in all aspects of their lives.

Avenue delivers across Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire and Moray and has bases in Aberdeen and Elgin.

### **Why Relationships?**

Relationships are a key part of all our lives, whether with partners, spouses, our children, wider family members, friends, colleagues or neighbours. Our lives are defined and enriched by our relationships with others and the quality of those relationships can have a profound impact on our wellbeing and resilience.

Children have a right to enjoy a childhood that is healthy, positive and filled with love. There is a great deal of evidence to show that children need to experience healthy, positive, loving relationships throughout their development. The more healthy relationships that children and young people experience, the more likely they are to form positive and respectful relationships as they grow older, and ultimately to live happy and fulfilled lives as adults.

Often, however, the maintenance of positive relationships can be one of the most difficult tasks we face in life, and a task that we invariably feel under-prepared for. Whether people and families live together or apart, are married, single, separated or divorced, Avenue can help them to find ways to develop as individuals so that they can interact with respect, limit conflict, and feel empowered to act in the best interests of their children.

### **What does Avenue do?**

Avenue works with children, adults, couples and families, whether they are living together or apart. We support healthy relationships by offering a range of services according to the needs of the individuals and families.

There are 4 main strands to the work that we do:

#### *Counselling/ therapy*

Avenue offers a number of different counselling and therapeutic services to address the specific needs of the people coming to Avenue. Options include: couple counselling, family therapy, individual (generic) counselling, young person's counselling, art therapy, psychosexual therapy, and cognitive behavioural therapy. Our therapists take a systemic view, recognising that people are part of families, groups and other systems. These connections are crucial to individual wellbeing and recovery, just as individual wellbeing is crucial to the health of couple/family/other relationships and connections. Many of our therapeutic services are available to individuals, couples, or families, and an intervention will often include a mix of individual and joint sessions according to the process and the need.

### *Family Mediation*

Family Mediation helps parents to talk to each other, reach mutual decisions and agree on practical arrangements. It can help parents to agree arrangements for children, including residence and family time schedules, and to find ways to communicate after separation that avoid conflict. Mediation focuses on practical arrangements for the future, taking children's views, needs and feelings into account. Family mediation puts children's needs first and aims to make separation less stressful for everyone.

To supplement family mediation, Avenue also offers a Consulting Children service, which hears the views of children, particularly regarding family time arrangements. These views are then fed back to parents and family courts so that they can be included in decision-making.

### *Family Time Support (previously known as Child Contact)*

Avenue's Family Time support helps children affected by family separation to maintain relationships with the parent they no longer live with, or with other family members. It provides children with a safe, welcoming place to spend time with their parent, or other members of the family, when separated parents find it difficult to see each other. Avenue's Family Support Workers spend time getting to know and supporting the families and most importantly the children, so that they can ensure that Family Time is as safe and positive as it can be under, what can be, very difficult circumstances.

Family Time support can take the form of supervised time or supported time, facilitated handovers which facilitate family time outside our premises, or a monitored online message service where face-to-face family time is not possible or is unsuitable. Wherever possible and safe for the child, Avenue's Family Support Workers support families to progress through the different types of family time, with the aim of the families becoming self-managing.

### *Early Intervention and Prevention*

Many of the people and families that come to Avenue have been struggling with difficult relationships, unhealthy dynamics and low levels of wellbeing for years. The impact of repeated trauma can be significant and time often allows positions and behaviours to become entrenched. We know that many of these situations could be avoided with timely interventions that empower the people involved to understand how they can take control of their situations and avert damaging environments. Avenue is therefore focusing on developing more early intervention and prevention services, and accessible resources that can be disseminated into the community to support people to develop the skills and understanding they need to build healthy connections and relationships.

Parenting Apart a psycho-educational and peer support session which help separating parents to understand about the process of separation and divorce, what their children need from them when they are living apart and how to work together and put their children's needs first. Avenue is also developing other psycho-educational groups to support individuals, couples and families at key stages of transition.

Family Wellbeing Groups provide a space for parents to learn tips and tools to support the wellbeing of their families.

Avenue's wide range of services allows us to work holistically with a family, responding to their needs, and keeping the child/ family/ individual at the heart of everything that we do. All of Avenue's services begin with an intake session which allows the people who come to us to discuss what they hope to achieve and explore the best option for them.

We receive referrals from a range of sources, including from our partner agencies, from the individuals and families themselves, and also from family courts and solicitors. Many of our referrals also come through GPs, schools and social care.

### **What difference do we make?**

Avenue helps families, couples and individuals to find healthy solutions to their particular situations. We help people to find ways to communicate and explore options constructively. Many of the families and couples that come to Avenue stay together as a result of our support. However, our aim is not to keep people living together, whatever the cost to the individuals. Often separation is the healthier option, and Avenue helps families and couples to negotiate the practical and emotional hurdles that separation presents. We help all the people involved to find a voice and be heard, including the children whose lives are impacted by these important decisions. Our aim is to help all parties to communicate and maintain connections with each other, wherever it is safe and healthy to do so.

Evaluation is built into every service that Avenue offers and feeds into service design. It might include: collecting information on individual goals, before and after evaluation, specific wellbeing measurement tools such as CORE or SDQs. We also actively encourage the people who use our service to provide us with feedback on their experiences using a range of techniques: feedback forms, conversations, suggestion boxes/walls etc.

### **Why Avenue?**

Avenue has been working in this field (in various guises) for over 70 years and has been registered with OSCR (Scottish Charity Regulator) since 1988. We understand the needs of children and families, as well as the challenges that we can all face when trying to maintain healthy, happy relationships amidst the pressures of daily life.

Avenue is a member of Relationships Scotland, a Scotland-wide network of services that deliver similar services. This means that, while we are an independent charity with the ability to respond flexibly to local need, we also work within national standards and our team accesses a wide range of expert support and training.

### **Strategic Priorities**

#### *Meeting Demand*

The pandemic has had a significant impact on families and relationships in the locality. Our partner organisations have told us that 75% of the families who are accessing their services are in the process of separating. If we add to this the current cost-of-living crisis, it is clear that families are under more pressure than ever.

Avenue is experiencing increased demand across all of our services, and our waiting lists are growing for support that should be timely. We know that many people don't come to us until they are in crisis, and having to wait before they can access our services can potentially be damaging and make positive resolutions harder to achieve.

We are working hard to increase our capacity and ability to respond in a timely manner to the increased demand. We are aiming to do this through increased fundraising activity, more partnership-working, and the development of innovative responses. In particular, we will be pursuing opportunities for additional community fundraising and corporate support.

We have also pledged to ensure that our services are accessible to all. The majority of our counselling and therapy services are now completely free, and we offer free/concessionary rates for all other services for people on benefits/low income (not means-tested).

### *Trauma-Informed Practice*

At Avenue we are engaged in a full review of our organisation to ensure that our work is fully trauma-informed. Everybody who comes to Avenue is experiencing relational trauma, and for a huge proportion, this is overlaid with other traumatic experiences such as sexual abuse, physical violence, illness and bereavement. We recognise that the quality of the relationships we offer to the people who come to us for support is vital in addressing the effects of that trauma, and empowering people to develop healthy connections with others. Our workforce is engaging in trauma training and we are involving the people who come to Avenue in service re-design, with a view to tracking their journey through our services, and ensuring that we are, at all stages, respectful, nurturing and empowering for all.

### *The Promise*

Avenue has made a commitment to #keepthepromise. We are working towards embedding children's rights at the heart of everything we do. As we engage in ongoing service review we are exploring ways to ensure that we are co-producing services with the people who use them, including parents, carers and children/ young people. We are working with partners with the aim of pushing systemic change that allows children to influence the decisions that are made about their lives, particularly in the judicial system.

### *Early Intervention and Prevention*

Avenue is developing early intervention and prevention services, and accessible resources that can be disseminated into the community to support people to develop the skills and understanding they need to build healthy connections and relationships.

### *Partnership-working*

At Avenue, we know that collaborative working is the best way to get results for children and families. We are working hard to engage with other organisations to reduce duplication, and to raise awareness of all the services on offer in the locality so that families and children are referred into the most appropriate services for their needs. We often work with families who are receiving support from other agencies and aim to work in partnership with these other organisations in the best interests of the family. Where we recognise a need for support from another agency, we refer or signpost families, and similarly other agencies refer into Avenue where there is need for specialist relationship support, therapeutic interventions, mediation or family time services. We sit on networking and collaborative working groups in all three Local Authority areas in our delivery footprint (Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire and Moray.).