



STIRLING AND DISTRICT WOMEN'S AID FAMILY OUTREACH SERVICE EVALUATION: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Animate, a small Scottish consultancy which brings considerable experience of working within the violence against women sector, was invited to conduct an external evaluation of Stirling and District Women's Aid 'Family Outreach Project' during its fifth year of funding from The Big Lottery.

In addition to supports being offered on an 'outreach' basis – which included both visiting families in their homes (including, but not limited to, those who have moved out of refuge), as well as work in Cornton Vale Women's Prison, one of the key features of this initiative was working with *the family*, rather than primarily focusing on the woman seeking support.


While all standard Women's Aid supports were available to women, which would regularly include working with children who live in refuge, this project focused on building the resilience, and safety, of the *family unit* - in their own environments.

While the Big Lottery funded 1.5 FTE posts of Outreach Workers to work with women, their work is wholly integrated with that of the Play Workers, who work with children - and are funded through the Scottish Government's Children's Fund. To give a full picture of the impacts of the Family Outreach Project, including its distinctive approach, the work with children will be considered within the report.

Methodology

This report is informed by consideration of the organisation's own evaluation and reporting data, and in-depth interviews with staff including two Outreach Workers, two Play Workers and the organisation's Manager.

As should be anticipated, it was not easy to engage a significant number of women who have been supported by the project in the evaluation process. However, we had 17 women give detailed replies to an on-line questionnaire, and we were able to follow that up by



conducting two-stage telephone interviews with five women, which we have developed into the Case Studies included in the report; and quoted within this summary.

Finally, we interviewed nine key external partners, who shared valuable and affirming perspectives on the work of the Family Outreach Project.

Project aims, target groups, actions & intended outcomes

The vision for the development of an outreach service, titled ‘Moving On – Breaking the Cycle of Domestic Abuse’, with Big Lottery funding was that:


‘Women will be supported towards safe permanent accommodation with their family and receive a package of support that includes direct support from outreach staff as well as a volunteer who will assist them to reconnect with their community. One to one support to address more difficult issues will be provided by relevant staff along with training and development.’¹

This would be delivered by two Outreach Family Workers, equating to 1½ full time posts, working with two distinct client groups:²

- **Families in transition:** The SDWA team recognised that, once the initial crisis relating to domestic abuse is addressed, many short-term challenges remain. Moving away into temporary accommodation requires changing schools, can generate isolation due to being away from friends and family, and lead to feelings of guilt and blame. These can place the relationship between a mother and her children under pressure. When women move on from a refuge they must become more independent, take more decisions and responsibility, and become accustomed to living on their own. It is an especially vulnerable time and families need to be supported to make get involved locally, make new connections and friends, discover their local area and integrate into new schools and workplaces.
- **Families staying in their own home:** The staff team recognised that women who choose to stay in their own home, and require their partner to leave, face different challenges. Support from SDWA will be required at different times and must be co-ordinated with the police, social work, education and health, amongst others. The team also recognised the crucial role, in the medium term, of outreach support in supporting families to re-define their relationships, and to become more confident

¹ Big Lottery application 2012, Page 2

² Big Lottery application 2012, page 5



and resilient. Women are at risk of taking their partner back and need a significant amount of support to enable good safety planning and develop gatekeeping skills.

The grant application envisaged SDWA developing individualised support packages for each family that included some, or all, of the following activities. These were planned to be delivered with a blend of staff and volunteers:


- Sustained one to one support to families
- Group support through women's support groups and children's support groups
- Issues based support groups
- Volunteer befriending in the community, supporting families to make connections locally
- Advocacy on behalf of families with services and other agencies
- Support with benefits, legal advice and housing options
- Access to information and support to enter training, education and work
- Information sessions from partner agencies, such as the local Citizens Advice Bureau, Open Secret (confidential support for survivors of childhood abuse and trauma) and Forth Valley college
- Counselling sessions for those with identified need

The project's key outcomes were defined as follows:

Outcome 1: Families who have experienced domestic abuse have improved resilience, and awareness to move forward and rebuild their lives.

Outcome 2: Families who have experienced domestic abuse have improved their skills to keep safe and the confidence to rebuild positive relationships.

“Being able to keep services available to women in rural areas is essential. Money, bus services, travel time are all very real barriers to accessing a city-centre service. There is no other service that does what we do. It is important for teachers, doctors, police to have service to pass families on to. We are key people in the middle for all the different services – we can lessen the multi- agency load for mum, we can handle communication – advocate for women throughout their journey, strengthen their self-esteem, help them understand the impact of domestic abuse on their children. We can get all the right people, and resources, involved at the right time....”



We are out and about, meeting women in local cafes/shops, or in the office – on their terms. Some women who we see are still with partners and have very limited time – we can work around it all. We might take them somewhere that there is an area for kids to play. It just looks like mum is meeting friend for coffee.


We cover whole of Stirlingshire – up to Crianlarich. We have met in community halls, GP's surgeries, all sorts of places. A pharmacist from Fallin asked us to speak with one of the staff – who wished to raise concern about a woman. They made a consulting room available, so we could meet her. We can do our thing anywhere – as long as confidential, and women trust that it is.

We are different because we go into the family home – so children are automatically there. We think about parenting – support the woman as parent, thinking about them as family – not just mum, and what she needs. Children are paramount in all decisions – we are often thinking about child protection. Because mum trusts us, she trusts our child protection actions – she knows it is coming from good place. It isn't often the way they feel when professionals are involved. When we have to disclose contact with perpetrator, she knows it is with respect for her, and concern for the wellbeing of her and kids. Safety planning is key.” (from an interview with staff)

PROGRESS AGAINST OUTCOMES FOR FAMILIES

The project has achieved, or surpassed, its targets annually – apart from a slight dip in 2015/2016 when there were staff changes in the very small team (limiting the capacity of the team for the period of recruitment and induction.) They have also been successful in securing funding from the Big Lottery (2012) for a joint initiative with the local CAB, called the Domestic Abuse Transition Advice (DATA). This project has a solicitor and a benefits advice worker who work solely with SDWA clients. They have also been successful in securing a further .5 staff post (2017), bringing the team up to two full-time members of staff.

Every woman we heard from, whether on-line or in an interview, could not say enough about how their involvement with the service improved their lives, and those of their children. While they went on to illustrate this in a range of ways, there was an overwhelming sense of gratitude – and stark contrast between their lives at the point they engaged with the service, and at present.



We heard every outcome indicator set in the funding application *brought to life* in their diverse stories. The quotes below come from within the 17 replies we had to the on-line questionnaire that was sent out, and subsequent interviews.

“Women's Aid gave me the support to keep going when I felt like my whole world had collapsed. They helped by listening to me and understanding what I was going through, which gave me the strength and courage to continue. They involved me in a support group which helped me to see that I am not the only one, have given my children one to one counselling at school, assisted me with the ongoing court case, are always there by phone, messaging or to pop in if I need to talk. I am now receiving counselling at Women's Aid to help me with the loss and trauma I have been through. I don't think I would be where I am today without all the ladies at SDWA.”

“I think if I had not had the amazing support I would have gone back with my abusive ex-partner”


“Woman's Aid is rebuilding a broken, ill me from the person that was squashed, abused, bullied, mentally tortured and physically abused into the real happy mother I can be.”

“I am really proud of how mine and my children's lives have changed for the better.”

“I am much more confident – I am working, I finally got my driving license, I exercise regularly, and I am planning to return to studying, and get a qualification. I know that I am worth taking care of, and I do it! Honestly, even hearing myself say this...sometimes I even surprise myself by how much I have changed. Not just what I am doing now, but how much my thinking has changed.”

“If Women's Aid didn't have an outreach project, I am not sure what would have happened to us. If they hadn't been willing to come see me in the homeless shelter, even though it was not far from their office, it wouldn't have been possible for me to have their support. I was in hiding – literally hiding. I would have been terrified to have been seen in the city centre.”

“Staff escorted me to the rural area in which I am now living. They helped me to get a school organised for my children, and got me linked into support from the CAB, which was invaluable. Setting up a life isn't easy, but they supported, and encouraged me.”



“If there wasn’t Women’s Aid, I am not sure I would still be alive. Where else would I have gone? My GP? The Police? What would they have done that would have meant me and my kids are safe, let alone cared for? I had very low confidence and self-esteem when I left him – that is one of the effects of domestic abuse. I wouldn’t have even known where to begin.”

“Women’s Aid got us housed, had panic alarms installed, got my children registered in a new school, supported me in court – which I don’t think would have been possible for me, without their support. The Family Outreach Service provided all of this- and also supported my children directly.”

“Working with the Family Outreach team has completely changed my life – and my sons’. It has been three years that I have been away from my partner – a relationship I had tried, and failed, to leave twice before.”

“Being so well supported – on a practical level, the emotional support, being supported in court...it kept me going. I got my confidence back.”

“I live out of town, I have a big job and two kids...the flexibility of someone coming to me makes it possible. My diary is so tight – the outreach makes it possible. Yes, I have transport – so COULD have made it in to town. I am just not sure that I would, could, have prioritized a chunk of time on a regular basis, when I am juggling so many other things.”

“My son sees his outreach worker at school, once a week. Women’s Aid has been good at linking in, joining up all the dots...keeping the school on board, and helping them understand what might be going on for the children.”

“I would like to volunteer for Women’s Aid, so that I can give other women hope too.”



EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS AND PARTNER AGENCIES


While the Family Outreach Service does not have any specific targets relating to how they build capacity around working with survivors of domestic abuse in related professional agencies, and thus strengthen a range of supports for women and children, we heard considerable evidence of these impacts. This aspect of the service offers considerable *added value*.

The Family Outreach Service is well connected and experienced as integral to the range of services on offer to women and families both in the more remote rural, and semi-rural, parts of Stirling district; as well as those who are harder to reach, like the population in Cornton Vale. The fact that outreach staff go out to them is highly valued by all partner agencies for a number of reasons. They are recognised as being able to access and connect with isolated people (including those with particularly chaotic lives) and play a crucial advice and support role that begins with addressing the practical needs that people present with (e.g. childcare/school, rent arrears, food poverty, benefits, and debt), thus bringing other services into play, before they get to the core domestic abuse issues.

Stirling Council's Domestic Abuse Coordinator sees them as leading the way; effectively extending the reach of local authority services into rural communities, by developing connections and relationships that can then be built upon. This model of service delivery is particularly valuable in relation to the 'place-based approaches' being developed under Community Planning in Stirling to enhance services' capability to respond to need in communities. They are valued for the quality and robustness of their data collection and Stirling are looking to replicate this for statutory agencies, so they can better target and coordinate services.

They are valued for their strategic contribution too. They bring a focus on children and families to Forth Valley's Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC), where they are critical players and considered essential partners. They provide excellent training and are valued for their responsiveness and proactivity. They are leading the way, and their experience in dealing with emotional and psychological abuse is considered crucial.

Important evidence of the way in which the outreach staff, and SDWA more generally, are develop understanding and therefore practice with survivors of domestic abuse is the fact that no only 40% of referrals to their service come from women themselves (traditionally it



has been closer to 100%.) Police, nurseries, GP's, social workers, criminal justice workers, addictions workers, and housing staff are all referring families into the service.

“They are a specialist service alongside our more generic approach. My own practice working with women who experience abuse has developed exponentially working alongside them. I’ve learned a lot of mainly practical things and am now more nuanced in my approach. For example, in relation to safety I might use text when contacting a mum rather than phoning, and am more aware that routinely chapping on someone’s door can put them in danger. I also have a more developed understanding of why women stay in violent relationships.”

“They are fully integrated into our approach, rather than simply adding value. This is best demonstrated in the way their work is a key part of a child’s plan; they are key partners and help to mitigate risk. It would be a huge loss if their service wasn’t there – they are specialist and we couldn’t fill the void. We would have to try to fill it with much less specialist services.”

“They bring a focus on children and families to the multi-agency forums and are now critical players – the meetings wouldn’t go ahead without them. They are equal partners alongside SW, Health, Police etc. – we need them there.”

“I have a new understanding of where women are coming from, why it is difficult to leave...what makes it difficult not to return. When I represent a woman, I am trying to make the court understand why they stay ‘when it is so bad.’ Everything a woman says is undermined by the fact that she stayed or went back. Now I can explain that more effectively to the court.”

“They improve and expand the menu of options we can offer. Geography plays a big part in the uptake of services, and the access to services FOS provide on top of addressing core concerns around domestic abuse is invaluable. The food bank now delivers to rural areas, but prior to that FOS would take deliveries with them to clients, which as well as providing legitimacy for the visit, provided a lifeline. They are also able to help with advice on housing arrears, electricity being cut off etc. and they help people with no food and no money, as well as finding them a safe place to live. This builds trust. They meet with people in places where they are safe.”

“They are a crucial resource, and it would be great to have more of the same.”



CONCLUSIONS


The five-year funding package from The Big Lottery has enabled SDWA to develop a successful and well-integrated service for women and children who have experienced domestic abuse living in, and/or moving to, more rural communities within Stirlingshire. The service has surpassed its targets for supporting significant life transitions for these families, with a range of residual benefits within communities and amongst related professionals. These benefits are likely to have improved responsiveness to the needs of other women and children experiencing domestic abuse, resulting from increased awareness and skill development. One strand of evidence for this fact is the significant increase in referrals from professionals in these rural communities.

All of the women who engaged with the evaluation process, on-line or through interviews, highlighted the professionalism, responsiveness and person-centredness of the service. Professional partners with whom we spoke all highlighted the integral and valued nature of the service – how it complements their own services to those who have experienced domestic abuse, with many also commenting on how their collaboration with the outreach service has developed their own practice with DA survivors.

The flexible, and mobile, nature of the support available through the outreach project has meant that women have been able to engage with the service who might otherwise not have been able to access support from SDWA – had it only been available through its city centre office/refuges.

The focus on *the family unit*, rather than women and children independent of one another, is a strong feature of this service – and one that appears to develop both the confidence of the woman in her role as mother, and also the relationship that she has with her children. These changes appear to strengthen the resilience of each of the individuals, and also the family unit.

Women with whom we communicated told us about how their lives had moved on, with many pursuing new employment and training opportunities, in later stages of their engagement with the outreach service. They also described positive changes in their children – in terms of both coming to terms with their experience, and subsequently, their behaviour.



This is a valuable and unique service, that is worth highlighting within the Women’s Aid network in Scotland – which includes considerable rurality. Locating refuges, and support, within rural communities appears to add an extra layer of protection for families, through integration into these communities; as well as reducing stigma, and building awareness of issues relating to domestic abuse for professionals, as well as residents in these communities.

SDWA is clearly a well-respected and valued organisation within the area - and is to be encouraged in promoting its learning from the experience of developing its outreach service both locally and nationally. We also encourage SDWA to reflect on how it can integrate its learning within its own service delivery model – particularly the focus on the family relationship, and the strong ways in which staff working with children and young people and those supporting women shared their knowledge and experience for the purpose of strengthening their impacts for, and building the resilience of, the families.

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