

## Education and Lifelong Learning

# Evaluation of the Scottish Government Children's Services Women's Aid Fund

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The Children's Services Women's Aid Fund invested £6m between 2006/7 and 2007/8 for specialist workers to offer direct support to children and young people experiencing domestic abuse. A total of 43 projects were funded, offering support to children in refuges, follow-on support to children leaving a refuge and outreach work to children in the community. This evaluation looked at the effectiveness of the Fund in its first year of operation.

### Main Findings

- All 43 projects set up under the scheme had made significant progress towards meeting all, or almost all, of the key aims of the scheme.
- All projects achieved, or nearly achieved, the target of a minimum of three children's support workers in each Women's Aid group or local authority.
- All projects enhanced support to children in refuge, and to children leaving refuge and receiving follow-on support.
- All projects were in the process of developing an outreach service to children experiencing domestic abuse but whose mothers were still living at home.
- All projects enabled an increased number of children and young people to access a Women's Aid service.
- The service children's support workers were offering was valued by children, their mothers and other professional stakeholders.
- The service was available to a wider range of children.
- Children's support workers were working in participative ways with children.
- Partnership working between Women's Aid and other organisations was mainly positive. When issues arose, partners were working hard to understand each other's perspectives and resolve them.
- Some challenges to future expansion of the service were highlighted, including, the lack of a stable funding base for the future, lack of suitable premises for group-work and difficulties for rural areas in delivering a full range of services.

## Background

The Children's Services Women's Aid Fund invested £6m between 2006/7 and 2007/8 for specialist workers to offer direct support to children and young people experiencing domestic abuse. A total of 43 projects were funded, offering support to children in refuges, follow-on support to children leaving a refuge and outreach work to children in the community.

The Fund aimed to increase children and young people's access to a wide range of specialist support services to meet their diverse needs. It wanted to ensure that services met recommended practice standards and projects worked in partnership with relevant agencies so that children got the help they needed when they needed it. It was also important that children and young people should be able to inform service developments.

The evaluation explored the effectiveness of the Fund in its first year in meeting these aims.

## Methods

Information was gathered from all 43 projects set up under the Fund. The major part of the evaluation was based on 15 detailed case studies based in 10 sample projects. The research methods used were:

- **Case studies** – 15 cases were selected from 10 sample projects. Each case was reviewed and interviews were conducted with young people, their main caregiver, key workers and other professional associated staff.
- **Service effectiveness interviews** – interviews were conducted with service managers/coordinators or collective members in each of the 10 sample projects.
- **Key stakeholder interviews** – interviews with mothers, project staff, children's services planners and staff in partner organisations for the 10 sample projects.
- **Young people's questionnaire** – 258 questionnaires were returned out of 1081 questionnaires distributed in 41 projects.
- **Analysis of reporting templates** – analysis of monitoring reports submitted by all projects to the then Scottish Executive for 2006-2007.

## Findings: Access by children & young people to Women's Aid services

The Fund aimed to increase access by children and young people to Women's Aid services. The evaluation found that the Fund had enabled all the projects to meet or nearly meet the target of having three full time equivalent children's workers. There was also progress towards increasing the number of young people able to access a Women's Aid service.

Progress had been made in increasing the number of dedicated hours children's workers spend with children and young people. In general staff, children and mothers, local authority partners and other stakeholders seemed satisfied with the levels of support, although a minority of children reported wanting to spend more time with children's support workers.

There was widespread agreement that services were flexibly delivered, child centred and tailored to meet the needs of children and young people. There was evidence of out of hours and weekend contact at the level children wanted, however, a sizeable minority of children would have liked support workers around at times other than they were. Out of hours contact seemed to be informally organised, largely initiated by families and mainly involved contact over the phone to deal with particular problems or crises arising.

At the time of the evaluation some projects were at early stages of developing the outreach service. Partner organisations, other stakeholders and services themselves reported that these services were operating effectively. The specific role of outreach was not yet well defined, however, and different models of outreach were being delivered across projects.

Most Women's Aid services demonstrated effective promotion of their children's services. There were some examples, however, where professionals and service users had been unaware of the services for children. Awareness training for other professionals was mentioned as the most effective way of raising awareness of the service. Outreach work and awareness raising in schools was seen as an effective way of accessing hard to reach young people, such as children from minority ethnic groups, children with disabilities or children living in rural and island communities. Some children had sensitivities, however, about support being provided in school.

A number of potential barriers to the future continued development of Women's Aid children's services were identified. These included staff shortages, lack of time, lack of appropriate premises and young people's reluctance to access services.

## Findings: Specialist services to meet the diverse needs of children and young people

The evaluation confirmed the importance to young people of the children's support worker and the extent to which they value them and want to spend time on their own with them. Staff reported that all children had access to a one to one service if they wanted one and more than 90% of children responding to the questionnaire reported spending some time alone with their worker and this was valued. The key worker system seemed to be working well, with children aware that they had a key worker and any handover of worker being handled well.

Support plans were widely used by workers, with children involved in developing them. Practice varied in relation to the extent to which mothers were involved in the development of support plans. Some mothers did not know their children had a support plan. In relation to outreach, practice also varied as to whether mothers were informed that their child was receiving a service.

Most children's support workers supported children spanning a wide age range and covering a wide spectrum of need. A wide range of age appropriate services were being provided but some gaps remained. Outreach services in some areas were focused on secondary school age children, for example, with much less work with primary and pre-school age children.

The Fund had enabled an expansion of the group-work service which was appreciated by children and young people, their mothers and partner organisations. Some barriers to further expansion of group-work were raised, including its unsuitability for some young people and practical issues such location and travel.

Staff viewed supporting children and helping them maintain and build social networks as an important part of their job. Rules about being able to have friends in refuge were particularly difficult for children trying to maintain and build friendships.

Some children's workers identified benefits to providing support to mothers on parenting and relationships alongside support to children, but this needs to be weighed against the importance young people place on having a worker they identify as theirs, who is separate from their mother.

## Findings: Management, delivery of key processes and practice standards

The Fund has enabled the strengthening of operational management arrangements within Women's Aid groups. Services generally report adequate structures in place to manage and support staff working with vulnerable children and young people. This operates differently across projects and is informally organised in some.

The post of children's support worker covers a wide age range and broad spectrum of tasks. There is no single job description for the post. Staff have a range of skills, experience and qualifications. The induction process provided by Women's Aid for children's support workers seems thorough. Children's support workers are also able to access an ongoing range of internally and externally provided training opportunities.

Few problems were reported in relation to recruitment of staff, however, some problems with staff retention were reported. It is likely that uncertainty of funding and the short term, fixed term nature of many of these posts has contributed to this.

In some cases the fund enabled relatively rapid deployment of new staff and service development. This seems to have created some issues around differentials in terms and conditions for some staff doing essentially the same job, both between staff in different projects, but also for some staff working in the same project.

Children's support workers spend an appropriate balance of time on direct work with children and administration. Travel, completing reporting templates and writing funding applications were identified as barriers to time spent working with children.

Staff were involved in an ongoing process of assessing the needs of and risks to children. The issue of safety is always high on the agenda. In most projects the process is relatively unstructured and informal.

The issue of child protection is a priority concern and staff were aware of the complexities of working with this. Services reported that they take account of the Protecting Children Framework for Standards.

The majority of projects funded under the scheme were registered or were seeking registration with the Care Commission. Criteria for registration are complex and groups have received considerable support from Scottish Women's Aid to support registration.

There were mixed views about the usefulness of the recording templates for the Scottish Government. The main criticism was that they were very time consuming to complete and contained too much detail. Some workers mentioned that they had been useful in enabling projects to reflect on their practice.

## Findings: Opportunities for children & young people to inform service development and participate in ongoing evaluation

The evaluation information suggests that the principle that children and young people are listened to, understood and respected underpins the provision of the service. There were numerous examples provided of services being children led, with opportunities available for children and young people to influence the service they receive.

Procedures for enabling young people to inform service development have become increasingly formalised in recent years. This has been largely positive. Staff report some barriers to young people's positive participation, including asking children to participate in too many evaluations and difficulties in obtaining critical feedback.

## Findings: Partnership working with other organisations

At a strategic level there was evidence of Fund resources being appropriately used to establish or further develop the key relationships for partnership working. Local authority and other partners reported that the Fund had been useful in linking domestic abuse into Children's Services Planning, giving a focus to multi-agency planning and driving the agenda on children and domestic abuse. In some areas partnership working seems particularly well developed.

While there were examples of Women's Aid staff being aware of and integral to relevant local networks and forums, some staff reported that as yet they did not feel comfortable on these groups.

Relationships with different partners varied. Generally Women's Aid staff and local authority and other partners reported few concerns with information sharing about child protection. There were some examples, however, from both Women's Aid respondents and local authority and other partners where there seemed to be a lack of understanding of each others' concerns about information sharing.

The developing outreach service seemed key to developing relationships with education partners. Relationships with social work were in the main positive although issues had arisen, mainly around confidentiality, contact arrangements with fathers and sometimes work pressures. These issues seemed to be being sensitively addressed and discussed.

## Considerations for the future

A number of considerations for the future, designed to address points raised in the evaluation, are set out at the end of the main report.

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