

Measuring the impact of funding cuts on domestic abuse services for women and children in Scotland in 2016/17

“During a period where we are busier than ever before we have had restricted ability to meet need”

Scottish Women’s Aid has a membership of 36 Women’s Aid groups across the whole of Scotland, from Stranraer to Shetland. For over 40 years, Women’s Aid groups in Scotland have provided specialist domestic abuse services to women, children and young people experiencing domestic abuse.

These services range from crisis intervention – providing safe refuge accommodation – to supporting families as they rebuild their lives. Groups provide visiting support services in the community – working with women and children in their own home, or at drop-in services at local health or community centres. Many also carry out awareness-raising work, deliver training locally and carry out prevention work with schools, employers and other agencies.

The annual funding survey is conducted by Scottish Women’s Aid to gather information of the current financial situation of the network, and to chart the impact of year-on-year funding cuts.

Methodology

The funding survey was conducted using an online survey that was sent to all of our members in May 2018. The questionnaire asked a series of questions relating to the financial year of April 1st 2016 – 31 March 2017. The response rate to the survey was 78%, with 28 Women’s Aid groups completing the survey.

Key Findings

- Over half of Women’s Aid groups now have to operate waiting lists for refuge, meaning that women, children, and young people in immediate danger are not able to access a safe space
- Over three quarters of groups reported they had a waiting list for at least one of their services. One group reported that due to under-funded services, in some cases children and young people had to wait up to 5 months for support
- 86% of Women’s Aid groups are working with a reduced or standstill budget compared to the previous financial year
- 64% of Women’s Aid groups reported an increase in demand from women for services
- 54% of Women’s Aid groups reported an increase in demand from children and young people for services
- Almost half of Women’s Aid services in Scotland are having to use emergency financial reserves to maintain essential services
- 35% of groups reported having to make changes to services that had a direct impact on women and children. These changes included making worker posts redundant,

increasing waiting lists for refuge, carrying out less outreach work, offering fewer appointments to women seeking support, and reducing refuge provision

- 86% of Women's Aid groups did not receive an inflationary uplift from their local authority in 2016/17 to cover increased energy, transport, and other operational costs
- 44% of Women's Aid groups reported that changes to social security benefits have had an impact on service provision due to increased workload
- More than 1 in 5 Women's Aid groups have had to make redundancies or freeze posts in order to reduce staffing costs

Funding for Women's Aid services

The Scottish Government and local authorities continue to be the main sources of funding for domestic abuse services in Scotland. In 2016/17, Women's Aid groups reported that, on average 47% of their funding was provided by their local authority, and 27% provided by the Scottish Government. This is a noticeable shift in comparison to previous years, in which local authorities and the Scottish Government provided on average 58% and 30% of groups' funding respectively.

Big Lottery provided funding to 14 Women's Aid groups for a variety of projects. Other trusts and charities that provided funding to groups in the network include the Robertson's Trust, Children in Need, and Comic Relief. Groups' have also received funding from wide range of local fundraising activities and individual donations.

What these figures demonstrate is that, as a result of reduced funding and increased demand over a number of years, WA services have had to increasingly look for other sources of funding for core support services. It is inherently problematic that groups have to rely on temporary funding sources for long-term work, and that already-stretched staff resources must then be directed into often time-consuming funding applications. This, in turn, has a direct impact on those seeking support.

"We are never awarded what we ask for regardless of the evidence we provide. We have been at a standstill for many years."

The survey asked Women's Aid groups if funding from their local authority in 2016/17 was the same, more, or less than the previous financial year.

- 36% had their local authority funding cut by an average of 10%
- 50% received the same level of funding
- 14% received more funding from their local authority, averaging 2.9% more than the previous year

Receiving the same amount of funding as the previous year amounts to a cut in funding in real terms, as no inflationary uplift has been provided to cover rapidly rising energy costs, or travel (something which particularly affects groups based in rural areas), VAT and other costs.

“Although we have the contract in place with [our council], the value of the contract has not increased since 2005.”

The impact of funding cuts

35% of Women's Aid groups reported having to make changes to the services they provide as a result of reduced funding. Changes to services reported for the year 2016/17 as a result of cuts to funding include:

- Reducing open hours of a drop-in service
- Curtailing number of support appointments available to women
- Not filling posts of children and young people support workers and management posts
- Reducing refuge provision
- Reducing staff hours
- Making a team leader post redundant

Women's Aid groups are experts in identifying the needs of women, children, and young people with experience of domestic abuse. The network has over forty years of expertise in providing services which offer effective support to service users to meet these needs. Groups identified a range of services that they see need for in their work with service users, but that they are currently unable to provide. Examples of these services include counselling, prevention work, development of support work for children and young people, and more outreach.

Several of the groups stated that they had been able to provide some of these services in the past, but could no longer due to funding cuts.

“We still carry on. Live in hope we get our staff hours back.”

Funding cuts also have an adverse effect on the staff employed by Women's Aid groups. Over a fifth of Women's Aid groups made redundancies or froze posts in 2016/17 as a result of funding cuts. Other measures for reducing staffing costs included pay freezes, reducing staff terms and conditions, and cutting back on staff training and travel.

“All staff struggle with the demand of seeing a large number of clients and having the time to write reports, logs etc. Senior staff struggle to take the holidays that they are due and work significant unpaid overtime.”

“It's not good for morale. Staff are uncertain about the security of their roles which impacts on well-being. Staff are overstretched.”

Increasing pressure on services

Despite cuts to their funding, Women's Aid groups continue to report a greater demand for their services, year on year. In 2016/17, 64% of Women's Aid groups reported an increased demand for services from women compared to the previous year, and 54% of groups reported an increased demand for services from children and young people. Some groups reported an increase of demand of 30% on the previous year.

Increased demand for services coupled with fewer resources year-on-year results in groups having to place women, children, and young people who require support on waiting lists. The numbers of groups operating waiting lists and the length of the waiting lists remains critically high. Three quarters of groups now operate a waiting list for at least one of their services, with a number of groups reporting waiting lists of up to two months, and one reporting that funding constraints resulted in children and young people having to wait up to 5 months for support.

This is particularly concerning for crisis services such as refuge, which, by its nature, needs to be immediately accessible in order to ensure the safety of women, children, and young people who need it. However, 54% of groups were forced to operate waiting lists for refuge in 2016/17. This is supported by our Census Day data from the same year, in which of the 24 women and 22 children and young people seeking refuge on one day, just 7 women and 10 children were able to be accommodated.

Groups also continued to highlight the need to provide support to women with no recourse to public funds and their inability to do so within current funding constraints.

“More service users report [accessing welfare] as an issue in their already difficult lives.”

Changes to welfare have resulted in additional pressures being placed on the women, children and young people accessing Women's Aid services, and the workers that support them. 44% of Women's Aid groups reported that changes to social security and access to benefits had an impact on service provision in 2016/17. The reduction in income for many women has negatively affected their financial independence, and Women's Aid groups are having to commit more staff time and financial resource to support women and their families in navigating the welfare system.

“There are more women in severe financial hardship due to sanctions.”

“Staff have been asked to take on more work and responsibility and there has been no recompense for this.”

Short term funding

The current funding situation makes planning for the future incredibly difficult for groups. This is exacerbated by the short term nature of the contractual agreements that Women's Aid groups have with local authorities, their principal funders.

In 2016/17, 59% of groups reported that their contract with their local authority was only for one year, with 22% continuing to work with no contractual agreement or service level agreement in place.

The emotional and physical cost to Women's Aid staff of working to end violence against women, children, and young people is exacerbated by the threat of hours being cut, salaries frozen indefinitely, or roles being made redundant. In 2016/17, almost two thirds of groups were unable to pay their workers a cost of living increase, four groups had to make posts redundant, and two groups froze posts.

“I find it frustrating that the council and Scottish Government continue to pay increments to their staff, but will not allow the third sector to do so, at the same time as encouraging us to be 'living wage' employers.”

Funding shortfall

The impact of reduced and standstill funding has resulted in 29% of Women's Aid services reporting a deficit for the financial year of 2016/17, with insufficient funding to cover their costs. This figure has remained consistently high over the previous three financial years.

In addition, 46% of groups reported having to draw money from their reserves to cover the gaps in funding in 2016/17. This is a sharp increase on the previous year's figure of 30%, and an all-time high in the ten years that the annual Funding Survey has been conducted. Financial reserves exist for emergencies and unforeseen circumstances, and the fact that almost half of all Women's Aid groups have had to access them to maintain their service levels is a clear indicator that they do not receive enough from their principal funders. Using financial reserves to provide core support services also places the long-term sustainability of these services at severe risk.

Conclusions

Cumulative funding cuts over a number of years have resulted in a record number of groups having to turn women, children, and young people away from refuge, make workers redundant, and stop providing particular services all together. This has created serious risks for women, children and young people trying to access the specialist support that Women's Aid offers.

Despite these serious challenges, Women's Aid groups continue to offer an unparalleled level of support and quality of services to women, children and young people experiencing domestic abuse in Scotland.

The results from this survey make it very clear that the demand for services for women, children, and young people continues to rise, and that groups are being forced to access temporary, short-term funding streams and their own reserves to be able to meet it. These are not sustainable solutions.

In the following financial year of 2017/18, the Scottish Government provided additional grant funding to a number of Women's Aid groups through the Equally Safe fund. The impact of these grants will be assessed in future analysis. While these additional grants are welcomed, it is now essential that national and local government work together to develop sustainable funding solutions for Women's Aid services. Domestic abuse is as prevalent as ever, and it is critical that the network's specialist services receive the necessary funding to support the thousands of women, children, and young people who require them.