

Scottish Women's Aid 50

BREAKING POINT

The Growing Crisis in Funding Support for Local Women's Aid Services Supporting Women and Children Experiencing Domestic Abuse in Scotland

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Executive summary

Local Women's Aid services across Scotland are facing a growing gap between available resources and the need for specialist domestic abuse support.

Between 2020/21 and 2024/25, **68%** of services experienced a real-terms decline in income, while the number ending the year in deficit rose from **3** to **12**. Meanwhile, **92%** of services reported increased demand, adult referrals rose by approximately 43% between 2021/22 and 2025/26, and only **20%** of services reported being entirely able to meet demand.

These pressures are compromising frontline support, contributing to longer waiting times, reduced provision and increasing strain on staff. Without action, more services risk becoming financially unsustainable, leaving women and children with fewer options for specialist domestic abuse support.

The Scottish Government and local authorities must act urgently to secure long-term, flexible, inflation-linked funding; strengthen workforce sustainability; expand refuge accommodation and housing pathways; improve access to trauma-informed mental health support; and ensure funding decisions are shaped by specialist expertise and lived experience.

> ***We are currently at breaking point, running at a deficit and are making plans to cut our own expenditure by giving up office space and cutting staff hours across all services and have recently been informed that our council is planning more cuts for the financial year 26-27.*** Women's Aid Worker

Introduction

This report examines the growing funding pressures facing the network of local Women's Aid services across Scotland. The Scottish Women's Aid network comprises 31 local Women's Aid organisations that provide expert life-saving refuge, advocacy and community-based support to women, children and young people experiencing domestic abuse.

This report sets out recent, verified evidence that these essential services are approaching breaking point. Significant real terms funding cuts, lack of long-term, stable and adequate funding, and rising demand for services are placing unprecedented, unsustainable strain on the Women's Aid network in Scotland.



Funding cuts



Lack of long-term, stable and adequate funding



Rising demand for services

At the same time, some local authorities are failing to acknowledge decades of specialist expertise provided by Women's Aid services, actively bringing services in-house, calling for bids for gender-neutral services, and commissioning larger, consolidated contracts, often at reduced funding levels. While intended to create efficiencies, these moves threaten to put lives at risk by overlooking the specific needs of women who have experienced male violence and abuse. This includes their need for safe, trusted spaces and specialist support from women who understand the gendered nature of their experiences.

Scottish Women's Aid first raised the issue of funding reductions and their impact on services more than six years ago in the Resourcing Recovery report. Despite repeated warnings and clear evidence of the growing pressures on Women's Aid services, local authorities and the Scottish Government have not given the issue the sustained attention or priority it requires. The failure to adequately recognise and address these longstanding funding pressures has allowed the situation to deteriorate further, leaving services facing increasingly severe and unsustainable pressures.

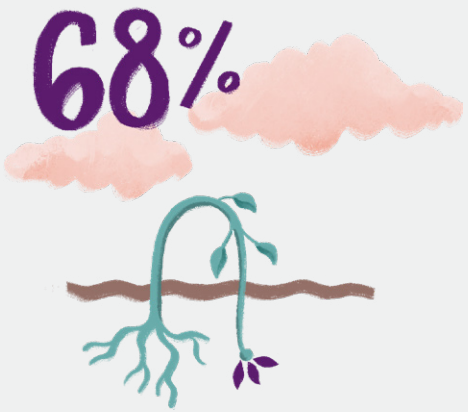
Despite repeated warnings and clear evidence of the growing pressures on Women's Aid services, local authorities and the Scottish Government have not given the issue the sustained attention or priority it requires.

For women and children experiencing domestic abuse, this unprecedented crisis risks their safety and wellbeing. Local authorities and the Scottish Government must commit to long-term, stable and adequate funding models and solutions for local Women's Aid services before services are further compromised, local Women's Aid services close across the country, and more lives are put at risk.



Key findings

Sustained funding loss is evident across the Women's Aid network in Scotland.



68% of local Women's Aid services experienced negative real growth from 2020/21 to 2024/25, meaning income increased slower than inflation and therefore lost purchasing power in real terms. (OSCR annual returns data)



More than 65% of services have faced some form of funding loss, ranging from reduced income (**36%**) to the complete withdrawal of funding from one or more sources (**31%**). Local authority funding was most frequently affected, with many services reporting standstill budgets that have failed to keep pace with inflation. This has amounted to real terms cuts, including staff redundancies, service delivery pauses or reductions, and increased pressure on remaining staff. Staffing losses, unfilled vacancies, reduced outreach provision, and paused children's services were also among the impacts described. (Network Insights Survey)



The financial strain is clearly reflected in the sharp rise in deficit budgets across the network. In 2020/21, only **3** services (**8.8%** of the network) ended the year in deficit. **By 2024/25, this had risen to 12 services, 39% of the network**. (OSCR annual returns data)

At the same time, the Women's Aid services are experiencing rising demand and referrals.



92% of local Women's Aid services reported increased demand, with **52%** describing this as significant. (Network Insights Survey)



Adult referrals increased from **13,678** in 2021/22 to **19,587** in 2025/26, representing **growth of approximately 43% over the period**. (OASIS data)

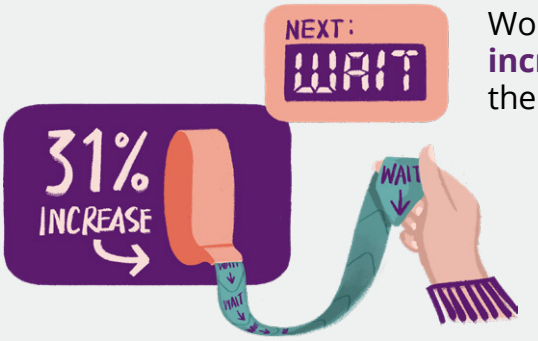


Only **20% of local Women's Aid services report they are entirely able to meet demand for their services**. (Network Insights Survey)

The funding loss and rising demand are compromising frontline services, putting the lives of women and children affected by domestic abuse at risk and compounding their trauma.



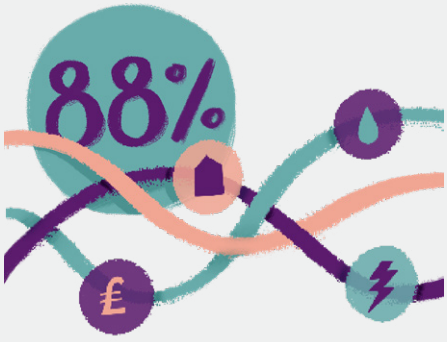
40% increase in the number of women seeking support who have been put on the wait list from **3,632** in 2021/22 to **5,071** in 2025/26. (OASIS data)



Women are also waiting longer for support, with a **31% increase in women waiting 3 months or more** between the 2021/22 and 2025/26 financial years. (OASIS data)



Children and young people services have the highest proportion of extremely long waits (**36%**) across all service areas. (Network Insights Survey)



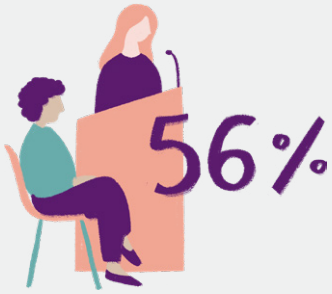
Almost all services (**88%**) reported that the cases they see are either “somewhat more complex” or “much more complex.”



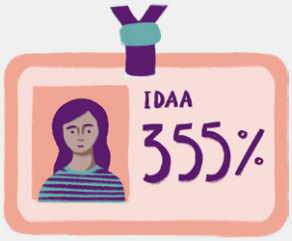
More than half of services (60%) reported an increase in the average length of support required, with **4** (**16%**) noting a significant increase. (Network Insights Survey)



According to OASIS data, adult service usage has had marked growth in specialist advocacy, indicating an increase in case complexity. While the increased level of support is positive and reflects women's greater access to specialist services, it also highlights a growing need, as more complex cases require additional time, expertise and resources.



Court support has increased significantly by 56% (from **385** in 2021/22 to **600** in 2025/26).



355% increase (from 147 in 2021/22 to 669 in 2025/26) in women accessing an Independent Domestic Abuse Advocate (IDAA).

Services are supporting more people, for longer, with greater levels of complexity, all within constrained budgets. In practice, this has led to difficult operational decisions, including narrowing referral criteria, prioritising crisis intervention over preventative work, and reducing capacity for outreach, group work or specialist programmes.

Data sources

Data referenced in this report has been drawn from:

OASIS data recorded by local Women's Aid services from 2017 to 2026. OASIS is the case management system used by Women's Aid services to record support provided, monitor demand, quality assure and report on outcomes for women, children and young people affected by domestic abuse. Of the **31** members, **2** didn't submit data due to capacity issues.

Income data from publicly available OSCR returns from 2020/21 – 2024/25, which show the total income from all funding sources and include all affiliated Women's Aid organisations in Scotland.

Scottish Women's Aid submitted an **FOI request** in September 2025, asking all local authorities to provide details of funding, commissioning, and service changes affecting Women's Aid and other domestic abuse services from 2020/21 to 2025/26. **23** responses were received

The **Scottish Women's Aid Network Insights Survey**, conducted in 2025 of affiliated Women's Aid member services, provides direct insight into service demand, funding and workforce challenges. **25** services responded (**80%**), representing the majority of the Scottish Women's Aid network.

This report only references Women's Aid services affiliated with Scottish Women's Aid.

Note on network membership: The number of organisations included in the datasets varies across reporting years, and figures are reflective of those still operating in the given year. Scottish Women's Aid currently has **31** affiliated member services. This figure was previously **34**. Glasgow East Women's Aid closed in 2022/23, and Clydebank Women's Aid closed in 2024/25. Cumbernauld and District Women's Aid merged with Monklands Women's Aid in 2024/25.

Why it matters: most prevalent types of abuse experienced by service users

While this report focuses on the critical funding issues facing local Women's Aid services in Scotland, it is important to begin by recognising the devastating human reality behind the figures. The OASIS data recorded by local Women's Aid services between 2017 and 2026 captures the types of abuse experienced by women and children seeking support and reveals a deeply troubling and persistent pattern of harm.

Most prevalent type of domestic abuse for women accessing Women's Aid services in Scotland

Domestic abuse	3,208
Emotional/Psychological Abuse	3,110
Jealous/Controlling Behaviour	2,470
Surveillance/Harrassment/Stalking	1,936
Physical Abuse	1,841
Sexual Abuse	1,686
Financial Abuse	1,603

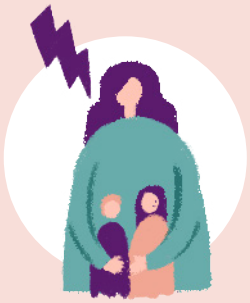
Most prevalent recorded type of domestic abuse for children accessing Women's Aid services in Scotland

Domestic abuse	976
Emotional/Psychological Abuse	946
Jealous/Controlling Behaviour	585
Surveillance/Harrassment/Stalking	506
Physical Abuse	379
Sexual Abuse	139
Financial Abuse	262

The data points to the following:



Domestic abuse sometimes involves physical assault or even murder. However, coercive control in the form of emotional and psychological abuse, jealous and controlling behaviour, and surveillance, harassment and stalking is the most common experience of women and children affected by domestic abuse in Scotland.



Children are not merely witnesses to abuse; they are survivors in their own right. When children live with domestic abuse, they are victim-survivors, and life with an abuser typically includes coercive control, physical, sexual and financial abuse for children and young people as well as their mothers.



Financial abuse is a prevalent, harmful form of abuse and requires greater public awareness. This form of economic abuse involves a partner or ex-partner controlling spending, access to cash, assets and finances and creating debt in the survivor's name, restricting their financial independence.

These are not simply statistics: each data point represents a woman or child whose life has been affected by domestic abuse

These are not simply statistics: each data point represents a woman or child whose life has been affected by domestic abuse, often with profound and lasting consequences.

As not all women experiencing domestic abuse in Scotland seek support from Women's Aid or reach out at all, this data is only the tip of the iceberg in terms of the nationwide crisis of domestic abuse. If action is not taken to address the systems and inequality enabling the abuse and the resources available to support those experiencing it, the picture reflected in this report will only become more devastating.

Funding decline and escalating financial risk across the network

Funding loss, inflation issues, and consequences

Analysis of publicly available OSCR income data shows that total income across the Scottish Women's Aid network increased in cash terms from **£22.5 million** in 2020/21 to **£25.0 million** in 2024/25. However, this increase did not keep pace with inflation over the period.

To assess changes in the purchasing power of funding, income growth was compared with inflation using the UK Consumer Prices Index (CPI) published by the Office for National Statistics. Inflation was calculated across the relevant financial years rather than using a single annual inflation rate.

Across the network, total income increased by approximately **2.6%** per year in nominal terms between 2020/21 and 2024/25. Over the same period, inflation increased by approximately **5.5%** per year on an annualised basis. This indicates an annualised real decline in income of approximately **2.7%**.

Analysis of individual organisations[1] shows that the majority experienced negative real growth:

6	**organisations (18%) experienced positive real growth**, meaning income increased faster than inflation.
5	**organisations (15%) experienced growth broadly around zero**, defined as within one percentage point either side of zero.
23	**organisations (68%) experienced negative real growth**, meaning income increased more slowly than inflation and therefore lost purchasing power in real terms.

1. These figures reflect the Scottish Women's Aid network across the reporting period, 34 organisations included in the OSCR analysis, inclusive of the closure of one service in 2022/23, another closure and a merger in 2024/25. For these organisations, the latest available 2023/24 return was used and the shorter period was adjusted accordingly.

The findings demonstrate that an increase in cash income should not be interpreted as an increase in resources available to services. In real terms, the majority of Women's Aid organisations have experienced a reduction in the purchasing power of their income over this period. This is particularly significant given the simultaneous increase in demand, case complexity and operating costs faced by specialist domestic abuse services.

Scottish Women's Aid submitted FOI requests to all local authorities, and responses outlined local authority funding to Women's Aid services from 2020/21 to 2025/26. A clear picture of the funding crisis emerged, driven at least in part by some local authorities. An analysis of the responses, covering **24** Women's Aid organisations[2], found that:

7 (**29%**) **had positive real growth** (**>1%**) in funding, where funding grew faster than inflation.

1 (**4%**) **had around zero real growth** (**0–1%**), where funding was just keeping up with inflation.

8 Together, these findings demonstrate that **8** (**33%**) **Women's Aid organisations had around zero or positive funding growth** from local authority funding.

16 (**67%**) **had negative real growth** (**<0%**), where funding was growing more slowly than inflation.

Scottish Women's Aid's Network Insights Survey, conducted in 2025, provides a picture of Women's Aid services' experiences. This funding picture illustrates a dramatic erosion of resources at a time when **92% of services report rising demand** and **88% report increasing case complexity**, often involving mental health challenges, housing instability, and systemic barriers such as court delays and limited access to statutory services.

2. Where funding data was unavailable for one or more years, real growth was calculated using the first and latest available funding figures, with the number of annual intervals adjusted accordingly. Missing or zero funding values were not treated as evidence of no funding.

> ***Whilst we are contracted by our local authority via the procurement process, our contract value has not increased since 2010, when we entered into our first contract.*** Women's Aid Worker

The Network Insights Survey found that more than **65% of services have faced some form of funding loss**, ranging from reduced income (**36%**) to the complete withdrawal of funding from one or more sources (**31%**).

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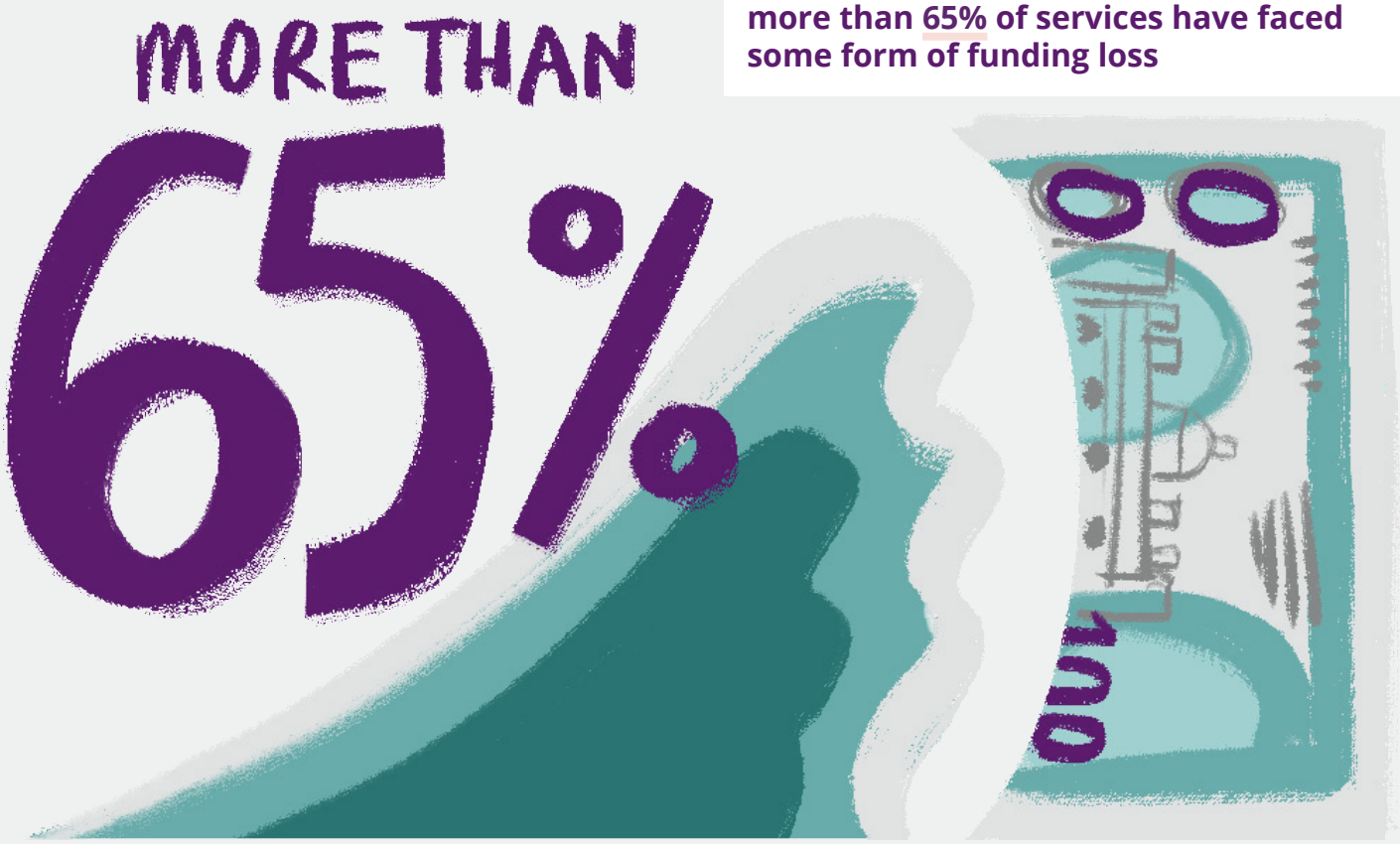


Local authority funding was most frequently affected, with many services reporting standstill budgets that have failed to keep pace with inflation. This has amounted to real terms cuts, including staff redundancies, service delivery pauses or reductions, and increased pressure on remaining staff. Staffing losses, unfilled vacancies, reduced outreach, and paused children's services were also among the impacts described.

> ***Local authority funding has been at a standstill over the last eight years, resulting in a significant reduction in the financing. Government funding has not increased to meet demand or rising costs, and independent funders are reducing funding grants.*** Women's Aid Worker



Over 20% of services reported closing part of their service in response to financial pressures, and 20% reported reducing provision.

The ending of vital short-term emergency or pandemic-era funds was also widely reported. The Scottish Government's 100 Days Fund provided short-term funding to Women's Aid services to address increased demand and capacity pressures arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. Services used the funding to recruit additional staff, expand support capacity, reduce waiting times, and provide support for women and children experiencing domestic abuse. Although the funding was initially introduced as a short-term measure, its continuation from 2021 to 2025 meant that many services came to rely on it to maintain frontline support and meet increased demand. While services welcomed recent uplifts to the Delivering Equally Safe (DES) Fund, many reported that these increases have not kept pace with rising costs, inflation and growing demand for support. In addition, not all services access DES funding, and the uplift only applies to the part of the service currently funded by DES; it cannot be used flexibly across other areas of the service.

The Network Insights Survey found that nearly half (**46%**) **of services reported running areas of their work without dedicated funding**, relying instead on reserves or short-term income streams. All those using reserves reported this practice as unsustainable, and **20% reported doubts about their financial viability over the next three years**.

> ***We are currently using our reserves whilst we wait to hear back from funders. This means we cannot develop or enhance services. We have staff members who are working more hours than contracted to meet immediate pressures and demand, but then this is also not sustainable.*** Women's Aid Worker

Resulting budget deficits

The financial strain is clearly reflected in the sharp rise in deficit budgets across the network.

According to the OSCR annual returns data, in 2020/21, only **3** services (**8.8%** of the network) ended the year in deficit. **By 2024/25, this had risen to 12 services**, **39% of the network**.

The Network Insights Survey (2025) findings reinforce the seriousness of this position. Almost all services (**92%**) **expressed concern about their long-term financial sustainability, and 20% reported doubts about their financial viability over the next three years.**

Demanding funding conditions and lack of long-term funding provision

Beyond overall reductions, services report that funding conditions have become more demanding. Over two-thirds (**68%**) **said funding requirements are now more onerous, citing shorter funding periods, increased reporting burdens, stricter outcome requirements, and reduced flexibility in how funding can be used**.

At the same time, services are increasingly reliant on trusts and charitable funders to plug gaps left by statutory funding.

This shift towards competitive, short-term, project-based funding undermines long-term planning and service continuity, forcing managers to devote significant time to fundraising rather than frontline leadership.



The funding crisis is affecting the women and children of Scotland

Taken together, the income data and survey findings paint a stark picture. Services are being asked to respond to rising and more complex demand while managing real-terms funding cuts when compared with inflation.

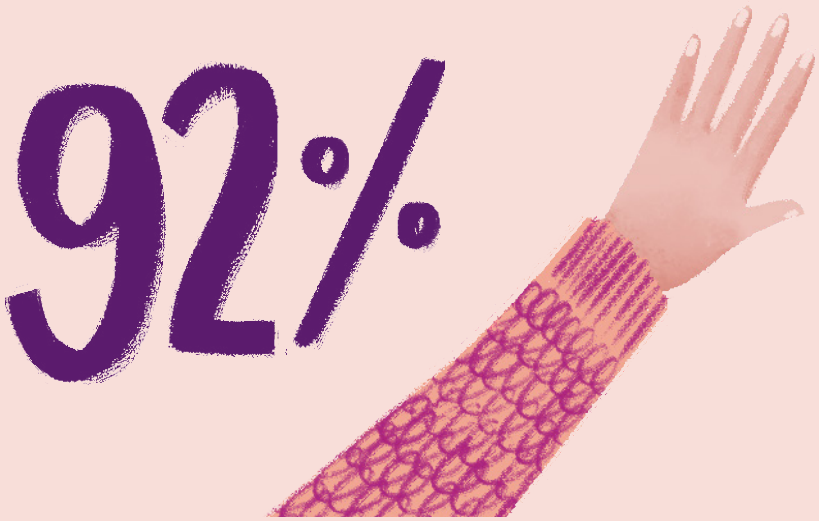
Without urgent, sustained, inflation-linked investment, continued erosion of funding will further destabilise local Women's Aid services, undermine workforce sustainability, and restrict the sector's ability to provide safe, specialist support to women, children and young people across Scotland.



Rising demand and referrals across the network and national helpline

Rising demand

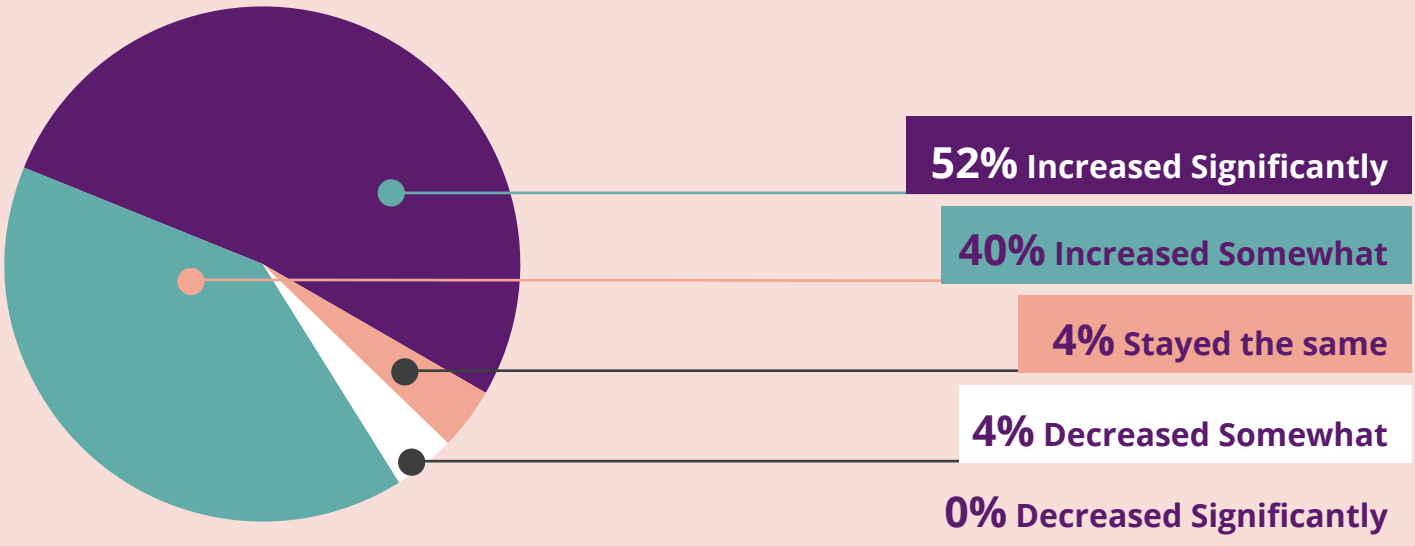
Demand for specialist domestic abuse services is rising sharply, despite a reduced budget. The Network Insights Survey found that **92% of Women's Aid services reported increased demand** and constrained capacity, stretching services beyond sustainable limits, with **52%** describing this as significant.





92% of Women's Aid services reported increased demand

In the last five years, to what extent has demand for your core services increased or decreased?



From Network Insights Survey Data 2025

Increase in referrals

The most striking trend is the continued growth in referrals across services.

OASIS data shows that adult referrals increased from **13,678 in 2021/22 to 19,587 in 2025/26, representing growth of approximately 43% over the period**. As the OASIS dataset does not include all services, the overall volume of referrals across the country is likely higher than these figures indicate. Nevertheless, the data provides a valuable indication of the continued growth in demand for services.

Children's referrals have remained relatively stable at around **2,900** per year, suggesting sustained demand rather than continued expansion.

Adult service referrals peaked in 2025/26, accounting for the largest proportion of all referrals recorded during the reporting period.

> ***The number of referrals coming through has doubled in the last 5 years, and we lost a staff member and didn't have the funding to recruit [another].***
>
> Women's Aid Worker



Police referrals continue to dominate external referral pathways. The table below outlines the referral rates since 2021.

Police referrals (2021 – 2026)

Year	Police Referrals
2021-22	**451**
2022-23	**581**
2023-24	**434**
2024-25	**532**
2025-26	**599**

Police referrals into Women's Aid services reached their highest level in 2025/26, accounting for nearly two-thirds of all external referrals. This reflects the ongoing importance of statutory partner referrals and identification of domestic abuse through justice pathways.

Issues with meeting demand across Women's Aid and the helpline

Unmet need remains a persistent issue. Services were asked to indicate how well their organisations could meet demand, and the results show that most cannot fully do so, with **only 20% reporting that they are entirely able to meet demand** in the Network Insights Survey.

An increase in demand is reflected nationally through Scotland's Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage Helpline, overseen by Scottish Women's Aid. Helpline contacts increased from **12,762** in 2023/24 to **14,921** in 2024/25, before rising sharply to **22,018** in 2025/26 – **an increase of 48% in a single year**. This growth followed a targeted awareness campaign from November 2024 onwards, with some months seeing increases of up to 84% compared with the same month the previous year.

> **This surge [in demand] demonstrates the scale of hidden and unmet need**

Demand has continued to rise in 2026. **Between January and June 2026, the Helpline received 13,841 contacts, compared with 8,735 in the same period in 2025 – an increase of 58.5%**. In April–June 2026 alone, contacts were 54% higher than in the corresponding period of 2025, with individual monthly increases ranging from **36%** to **66%**.

This surge demonstrates the scale of hidden and unmet need. When survivors know support is available and accessible, they reach out. Although the Helpline has expanded to meet this growing demand, it continues to operate under significant resource pressures in 2026.

> ***The financial crisis has resulted in fewer monetary donations. Exacerbating this is the media attention given to highlighting women and children living with domestic abuse, resulting in more women reaching out for help and support.*** Women's Aid Worker

The combined evidence from Helpline growth and service-level data shows demand rising faster than capacity. Without sustained investment across the wider network, increasing numbers of women and children seeking safety will face longer waits and reduced access to specialist support, resulting in greater risk and even greater harm.



Frontline service delivery compromised under intensifying demand

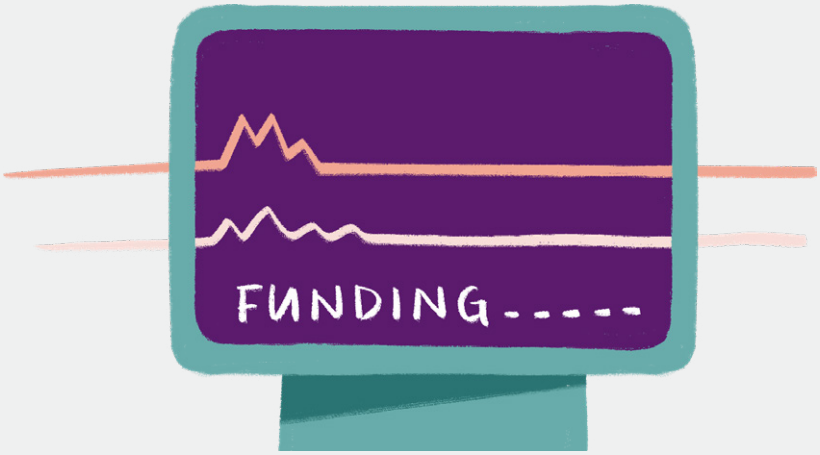
Across the network, Women's Aid services offer a wide range of support to women, children, and young people. The Network Insights survey asked organisations to identify the services they currently provide.

For a Women's Aid service, core support generally includes refuge, outreach, advocacy, and services for children and young people. Some services offer additional services, such as court support, training, and counselling, reflecting the diversity and specialist nature of support provided across the network.

The survey highlights that service delivery to women, children and young people affected by domestic abuse is under sustained and escalating pressure across the Scottish Women's Aid network.

Significant increases in wait list numbers and lengths

Both demand and reductions or flatlining funding have significantly increased the wait list for Women's Aid services. **OASIS data reveals that the number of women seeking support who have been put on the wait list has increased by nearly 40%** from **3,632** in 2021/22 to **5,071** in 2025/26.





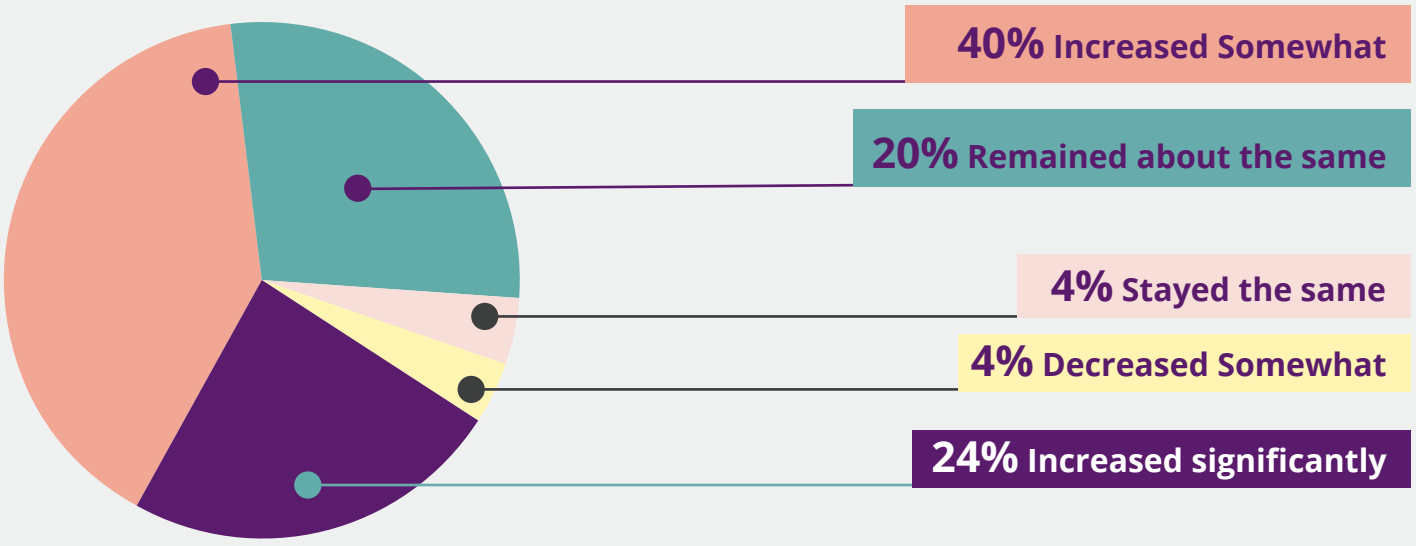
Women are also waiting longer for support, with a 31% increase in women waiting 3 months or more between the 2021/22 and 2025/26 financial years.

Adult waiting times of 3 months or more

Year	Number
2021/22	**694**
2022/23	**714**
2023/24	**978**
2024/25	**983**
2025/26	**912**

According to the Network Insights Survey, over half (**64%**) of Women's Aid services have reported longer waiting times for support, with a quarter (**24%**) describing significant increases.

Compared to five years ago, have waiting times changed?



Source: Network Insights Survey Data 2025

Children and young people services have the highest proportion of extremely long waits (36%) across all service areas.

Children and young people waiting times

Service	Very Short (less than one week)	Short (1-2 weeks)	Moderate (2-4 weeks	Long (more than 4 weeks)	Extremely Long (more than 2 months)	Not applicable
Refuge	21.8%	4.3%	21.7%	13%	17.4%	21.8%
Outreach	16%	12%	24%	12%	28%	8%
Children and Young People	12%	20%	8%	16%	36%	8%

Source: Network Insights Survey Data 2025

> ***Our waiting times have increased because the support survivors need is not confined to crisis intervention alone. For many, abuse does not end with separation; perpetrators often continue to exert control, meaning every case requires longer-term support, safety planning, and vigilance … at the same time, complex court proceedings and patterns of litigation abuse mean clients need sustained advocacy to navigate the legal system safely. The dynamic nature of risk, which can escalate suddenly and unpredictably, also demands ongoing review. Together, these factors mean each case requires more time and resources, stretching our service capacity.***
>
> Women's Aid Worker

Where waiting times have decreased, this appears linked to organisations introducing case management reviews, capped support sessions, or alternative support pathways to reduce waits.

The outreach crisis

Demand for outreach support is growing for multiple reasons, including growing numbers of women and children presenting, feeling able to remain in their own homes with protections, or more women are unable to access traditional accommodation-based services. The housing crisis, a shortage of refuge spaces, and the reality that many women need support while remaining in their own homes or relationships have made outreach an increasingly vital part of the domestic abuse response.

Many women cannot leave their area due to housing pressures, family responsibilities, work, or child contact arrangements. Others may not be ready or able to leave an abusive relationship but still need specialist support to manage risk, safety plan, navigate legal processes, and work towards recovery. Outreach ensures these women can access support wherever they are.

This growing need is reflected in OASIS data, which shows that outreach accounts for 30% of all adult service engagements, demonstrating its importance as a core element of domestic abuse support.

Top 5 services by type (2020 - 2025)

Service	Total Engagements
Outreach	**17,685**
Support	**10,438**
Drop-in	**7,300**
MARAC	**3,020**
Crisis	**2,966**

At the same time, some local authorities are failing to acknowledge decades of specialist expertise provided by Women's Aid services, actively bringing services in-house, calling for bids for gender-neutral services, and commissioning larger, consolidated contracts, often at reduced funding levels. While intended to create efficiencies, these approaches risk significantly undermining the specialist expertise, safe spaces and resources available to women and children affected by domestic abuse across Scotland.

While intended to create efficiencies, these approaches [of some local authorities] risk significantly undermining the specialist expertise, safe spaces and resources available to women and children affected by domestic abuse

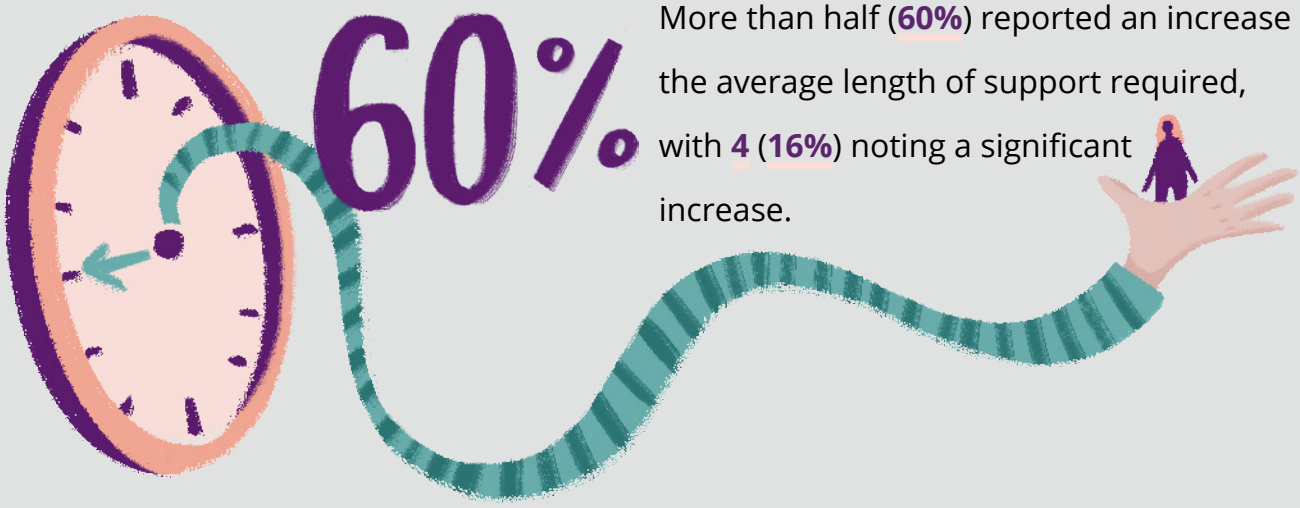
Women's Aid outreach services provide trauma-informed, gender-responsive support rooted in trusted local relationships and a deep understanding of women's experiences of abuse. As demand for outreach increases, any reduction in funding limits the capacity to reach women in their homes, temporary accommodation, and community settings, leaving some of the most vulnerable women without access to specialist support.

Protecting outreach within specialist Women's Aid services is therefore essential. As more women seek support outside of refuge settings, specialist outreach ensures women and children can access expert support, reduce risk, and move towards safety and recovery, regardless of where they live or whether they are able to leave a relationship.



Increase in case complexity and specialist advocacy

This demand is further exacerbated by the reported increase in case complexity. **Almost all services (88%) reported that the cases they see are either "somewhat more complex" or "much more complex."**



More than half (**60%**) reported an increase in the average length of support required, with **4** (**16%**) noting a significant increase.

> ***We are seeing increasing complexity in the cases we support, with the dynamic nature of risk often requiring longer-term, more intensive intervention. Misogynistic attitudes, particularly among younger generations, are contributing to heightened vulnerability and normalisation of abuse, while at the same time, the increased visibility of our service has encouraged many survivors to come forward for the first time, including those processing historic experiences such as childhood sexual abuse. Together, these factors mean more women are reaching out, with more urgent and layered needs, than ever before.*** Women's Aid Worker

According to OASIS data, adult service usage has had marked growth in specialist advocacy, indicating an increase in case complexity. While the increased level of support is positive and reflects women's greater access to specialist services, it also highlights a growing level of need, with more complex cases requiring additional time, expertise and resources.

There has been a 355% increase (from 147 in 2021/22 to 669 in 2025/26) in women accessing an Independent Domestic Abuse Advocate (IDAA). The IDAA provides emotional and practical support, makes safety plans, and collaborates with other agencies through Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARAC) to ensure the safety of women and children.

Court support has also increased significantly by 56% (from **385** in 2021/22 to **600** in 2025/26). Both increases likely reflect more complex cases, increased criminal and civil court involvement, and a greater need for specialist advocacy services.

Changing support needs

Network Insights Survey respondents highlighted several ways in which women's support needs have changed in recent years.



Increasingly, women present with more **complex mental health issues, financial hardship, and housing instability**, often compounded by a **lack of access to statutory services**.



Younger women are seeking support for issues in intimate relationships, while **online abuse and technology-related risks** have also become more prevalent.



Services are responding to more **complex cases**, including women with no recourse to public funds, victims of honour-based abuse, and those with prolonged court or legal proceedings.



Rural and diverse communities face additional challenges, including limited refuge spaces and language or interpreting needs.

> ***More women require support with more complex mental health needs. Due somewhat to the lack of service provision elsewhere. More women are financially destitute due to poor welfare support.***
>
> Women's Aid Worker

> ***Demand for refuge exceeds supply, housing stock shortages equals families in refuge longer than ever before, high demand for service vs staffing capacity, increased complexity of cases.*** Women's Aid Worker

> ***We are experiencing a low turnover in refuge due to the housing crisis, and the length of time women are waiting for safe permanent housing.***
> Women's Aid Worker

Services are supporting more people, for longer, with greater levels of complexity, all within constrained budgets. In practice, this has led to difficult operational decisions, including narrowing referral criteria, prioritising crisis intervention over preventative work, and reducing capacity for outreach, group work, or specialist programmes.

While safety planning and crisis response remain protected wherever possible, early-intervention and recovery-focused work is increasingly vulnerable when resources are stretched.

Recruitment and retention pressures

> ***Staff shortages have meant fewer support workers available to meet the rising demand, which has led to longer waiting lists and reduced support time per woman.*** Women's Aid Worker

Although the most immediate impact of the funding crisis is on frontline service delivery, workforce pressures are increasingly compounding these challenges. Findings from the 2025 Network Insights Survey show that recruitment difficulties are widespread across the Scottish Women's Aid network

Half of Women's Aid services are struggling with recruitment. These workforce pressures are directly affecting service capacity. In some cases, staffing shortages have reduced the number of support workers available to respond to rising demand, resulting in longer waits for women and children seeking support.

workforce pressures are directly affecting service capacity

Vacancies are taking longer to fill, with some services needing to re-advertise posts or temporarily redistribute caseloads among existing staff. In smaller organisations, even a single unfilled role can significantly reduce capacity and increase waiting times for women and children seeking support.

Retention is also a growing concern. Services highlighted the impact of high caseloads, growing complexity of need, financial uncertainty and the emotional demands of domestic abuse work. Short-term and insecure funding can make it difficult to retain experienced staff, particularly where organisations are unable to offer long-term job security, competitive pay progression or opportunities for service development.

Short-term and insecure funding can make it difficult to retain experienced staff

As a result, workforce challenges are not only affecting staff wellbeing but are increasingly limiting services' ability to meet rising demand and invest in preventative and early intervention work.

> ***We have been using our reserves for a support worker post to enable us to continue to deliver the outreach service. We have been applying (unsuccessfully) for funding for the outreach service since January 2025. The need to prioritise the outreach post has resulted in our plans to develop our prevention work (delivering groups to secondary schools) being put on hold.*** Women's Aid Worker

Actions required to ensure life-saving support for women and children affected by domestic abuse in Scotland

> ***Short-term funding cycles create uncertainty and strain on staff and services. Multi-year funding commitments would allow Women's Aid organisations to plan more effectively, offer long-term support to service users, and reduce administrative burdens tied to constant re-application for funds.*** Women's Aid Worker

This report highlights the scale of pressure facing local services in the Scottish Women's Aid network. Women's Aid organisations across Scotland are managing rising demand, increasingly complex cases and longer periods of support, while operating within shrinking, uncertain budgets. Together, these pressures are pushing many services to **breaking point**, widening the gap between the need for specialist domestic abuse support and the capacity of services to deliver it.

If action is not taken, the report points to the following future outcomes:



Local Women's Aid services across the country will continue to seek cost-saving measures, severely reducing the resources and support for women and children affected by domestic abuse in Scotland. This will include reduced provision for key services such as refuge and outreach, lengthening waiting times while women and children remain in dangerous situations.



More Women's Aid services will close, losing decades of expertise in local communities where the support is most needed.



Women and children affected by domestic abuse will have increasingly limited support options overall. Their options may include being supported alongside men and by men, and by services with vastly less experience than Women's Aid when they are most traumatised.

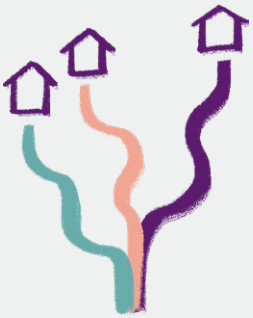
The following actions are urgently needed to protect the sustainability of specialist services and ensure women and children can continue to access life-saving support.



Long-term, flexible funding that reflects the realities of delivering specialist domestic abuse services. This would include the Scottish Government committing to long-term, stable and adequate sustainable core funding for Women's Aid services; moving away from short-term funding cycles; and ensuring annual uplifts that reflect inflation, rising costs and demand for support. These measures would reduce administrative burdens and support investment in organisational resilience and infrastructure.

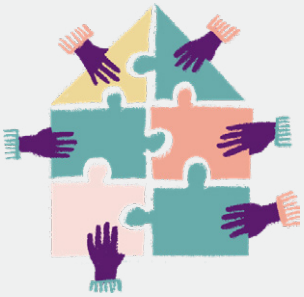


Investment in staffing and workforce wellbeing to support recruitment, retention and specialist expertise. The Scottish Government and local authorities should invest in the domestic abuse workforce, including funding for fair, benchmarked pay, workforce wellbeing and professional development. This will improve recruitment and retention and the sustainability of specialist expertise.



Expand refuge accommodation and housing pathways to reduce waiting times and improve access to safe accommodation, recognising refuges as critical safe housing infrastructure. Strengthen specialist housing responses to domestic abuse in the context of the housing crisis, while increasing protections that enable women to remain safely at home where appropriate.

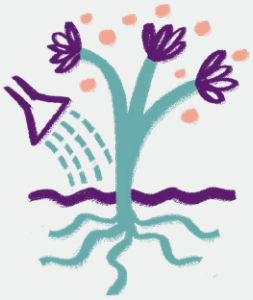
The Scottish Government, local authorities and housing partners should develop a coordinated response to the housing crisis affecting



women and children experiencing domestic abuse. This should include dedicated housing pathways for women experiencing domestic abuse, increased investment in refuge accommodation, reduced financial barriers to accessing refuge, improved move-on options and protections for women to remain in their own homes.



The Scottish Government and NHS should improve and expand access to trauma-informed mental health support services. Recognising the increasing complexity of need among women and children experiencing domestic abuse and reducing reliance on Women's Aid services to fill gaps in statutory provision.



Improved financial sustainability and planning support to strengthen organisational resilience across the network.



Ensure the planning, design and allocation of funding for domestic abuse housing and support services is co-designed with the domestic abuse sector, drawing on specialist expertise and lived experience to ensure investment is needs-led, sustainable and responsive to local demand.

Women and children experiencing domestic abuse deserve timely, high-quality support. Without sustained investment, the pressures outlined in this report will continue to push services closer to **breaking point**, placing the safety and recovery of survivors across Scotland at risk.



> ***We absolutely need long-term, sustainable funding directly from the government to meet demand with significant uplifts and ring-fenced financing and support for specialist services, as well as greater respect for the work that they do.***
>
> Women's Aid Worker



Scottish Women's Aid

2nd Floor, 132 Rose Street, Edinburgh,

Scotland EH2 3JD | Tel: 0131 226 6606

Charity No. SC001099 | Company No. 128433

@scotwomensaid | womensaid.scot