

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

Scottish Women's Aid survey of funding for Women's Aid services 2012-13

“ We'd run the refuge at a loss for the last 3 years and couldn't continue to subsidise the cost from our reserves, this year the refuge was closed.”

Scottish Women's Aid has a membership of 36 Women's Aid groups providing domestic abuse services across the whole of Scotland from the Borders to Shetland. Women's Aid groups provide specialist domestic abuse services to women and children; that ranges from crisis intervention - providing safe refuge accommodation - to supporting families as they rebuild their lives. They provide outreach services in the community, supporting 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 in schools.

Key Findings

- 92% of services are working with a reduced or standstill budget with no inflationary uplift to cover increased energy, transport, VAT and other operational costs. Up from 61% of services in 2009/10.
- Almost a third of Women's Aid groups (29%) had to make cuts to their services as a result of reduced funding. This included closing a refuge, cut backs to outreach services to women living in the community, reducing support hours to women and children, increasing waiting lists for both refuge and outreach services, and cutting therapeutic activities for children.
- 1 in 4 Women's Aid groups cut back on staffing costs, through redundancies, or freezing posts. Other measures include pay freezes and reducing staff terms and conditions.
- 68% of Women's Aid groups reported a greater demand for their services during 2012 -13. With the introduction of the welfare reform programme adding further pressure on services.
- A third of Women's Aid groups reported a deficit in the last financial year, with insufficient funding to cover their costs.
- 63% of Women's Aid groups are working with funding contracts of only 1 year, while 32% are working with no contractual arrangement or service level agreement.

Methodology

The survey was conducted using a confidential online questionnaire that was sent to all our members in August 2013. The questionnaire asks a series of questions relating to the previous financial year (1 April 2012 – 31 March 2013). The response rate to the survey was 72% with 26 Women's Aid groups taking part.

Funding for Women's Aid services

The Scottish Government and local authorities are the main sources of funding for domestic abuse services. This year Women's Aid groups reported that on average 58% of their funding was provided by their local authority and 30% provided by the Scottish Government. Women's Aid groups are also reliant on funding from charities and trust funds and carry out local fundraising activities.

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

- 8% received an inflationary uplift of 1 – 2%
- 12% reported a decrease, on average a cut of 5%
- 80% received the same level of funding.

Although most (21) of the Women's Aid groups that took part in this survey received the same level of funding from their local authority, in real terms this amounts to a decrease in funding as no inflationary uplift was provided to cover rapidly rising energy costs, or travel, VAT and other costs.

“Our travel budget is stretched to capacity, which limits our outreach work to vulnerable women living in more remote areas”

The Scottish Government in 2011 maintained funding for domestic abuse services for a further three years (2012 -15). Whilst it is positive that the Scottish Government demonstrated its continued commitment to funding frontline domestic abuse services, the funding awarded does not include any inflationary uplift within this funding period. In effect the reduction in public funding over the last few years has meant that Women's Aid services have had to absorb higher costs within reduced budgets - a real term cut in the value of their funding.

“We were able to cover the deficit with our reserves this year but would not be able to do this again”

Other means of raising funds such as trusts and donations do not cover the shortfall resulting from public expenditure cuts.

Fund-raising has become much more challenging in the current economic climate, with much greater competition for funding from charitable trusts, which themselves due to the recession, have less money available to provide as grants. Women's Aid groups whose primary focus is on service delivery, have limited capacity to divert to additional fundraising activities.

The impact of funding cuts

Almost a third of Women's Aid groups reported having to make changes to the services they provide as a result of reduced funding. Since 2009 the percentage of Women's Aid groups that have had to make changes to their services has increased year on year from 14% in 2009 up to 29% in 2012/13. Changes reported this year as a result of cuts to funding include:

- The closure of a refuge as the group could no longer subsidise the shortfall in running costs from their reserves. This reduced the number of refuge spaces from 10 to 5 in the local authority area
- Cut backs to outreach services providing essential support to women living in the community
- Reduction in the support hours provided to individual women and children
- Increased waiting lists for both refuge and outreach services
- A cut back on counselling services for women
- Reduction in therapeutic activities for children
- Increase in telephone support and less face to face contact

“We sometimes have to turn women seeking refuge away due to lack of space and we continually have a waiting list for our outreach service”

“We are seeing significantly more women and children and its taking its toll on services. Staff spend extra time doing more than their share of work – which is not sustainable in the long run”

In this survey almost a quarter of groups (24%) reported having to freeze posts or make staff redundant. Other measures included pay freezes, reducing staff terms and conditions, and cutting back on staff training and travel.

“Staff took a drop in their terms and conditions; this was difficult for them and may have led to a decrease in motivation and some staff leaving”

Increasing pressure on services

At the same time Women’s Aid groups are facing increasing pressure with over two thirds (68%) of groups reporting a greater demand for their services during the last year. An indicator of group’s inability to meet demand is the reporting of increasing waiting lists, and concern about the impact of this on the safety and wellbeing of women and children.

“We struggle to support women at point of crisis, is there a service if women and children are languishing on a waiting list?”

The introduction of changes in welfare benefits is an additional pressure on services with groups reporting an impact on staff time involved in supporting women with more complex benefit issues and appeals. Groups also reported that the introduction of the bedroom tax has resulted in women remaining in refuge longer and consequently fewer women able to access refuge at crisis point.

“Women present with increasingly complex situations and we spend more time supporting women with benefits, sanctions, appeals and housing issues”

“The bedroom tax has had a significant impact on refuge as we are not able to move women without children onto mainstream housing, there’s no suitable housing; as a result women get stuck in refuge”

Short term funding—increased uncertainty

Uncertainties around funding are exacerbated by the short term nature of the contractual relationships Women’s Aid groups have with their principal funders. Almost two thirds of groups (63%) reported that their contract with the local authority is only for one year, with a third (32%) working with no contractual arrangement or service level agreement in place.

“Our previous contract had been for three years but due to the local authority’s budget reduction only a one year contract was offered”

Insecure funding and short term contracts mean that Women’s Aid staff constantly work under the threat of redundancy and receive no cost of living increase. This year 80% of groups reported that they are unable to pay a cost of living increase and have limited opportunities to develop their skills because of cuts to staff training budgets.

“It’s very difficult to maintain a dedicated and enthusiastic staff group when their contracts are only for a year at a time”

Funding shortfall

The cumulative impact of reduced funding over a number of years has resulted in an increasing number of Women’s Aid services reporting a deficit, with insufficient funding to cover their costs. In this survey a third of groups reported a deficit, the same number as the previous year. This year, however, groups have been less able to draw on their reserves to fund the shortfall, with 20% of groups reporting that they drew on their reserves. – the percentage in the previous two years was 36%. This indicates that, for many groups, reserves have been depleted in maintaining service levels over the last few years.

“Our deficit is eroding our reserves and we will not be able to sustain this especially as our funding is frozen for three years”

Conclusions

The results of our 6th annual survey highlight the growing impact of funding cuts since 2008. Protecting service levels has been a constant theme throughout these surveys as Women’s Aid groups looked for other ways to cope with a reducing budget. The findings from this survey demonstrate that Women’s Aid groups have exhausted their capacity to do that. Compared to previous years, groups are no longer as able to draw on their reserves to subsidise service levels, more groups have had to reduce staffing levels and have made more significant reductions to their support services. The impact is now being felt by women and children who are unable to get the specialist support services they need when they need them.

Scottish Women's Aid is a charity registered in Scotland, charity number SC001099
and a company limited by guarantee, registered company no SC128433.
www.scottishwomensaid.org.uk