

aspire | learning
support
wellbeing

Supporting
sisters

4th Year Progress Report

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Coproduction and Coronavirus

This year, the Coronavirus pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges, changing the way we deliver, develop and evaluate service provision across all sectors. For Aspire Learning Support and Wellbeing, our dedicated volunteers have been at the heart of our support service adaptations, developments and achievements. Thanks to their remarkable commitment, compassion and courage to learn new skills, we have been able to continue to support women through these extraordinary times.

Supporting Sisters is a 5-year Big Lottery Community Fund Women and Girls Initiative funded project comprising of a range of holistic, integrated support services, co-designed and delivered by women for women. In September 2019, we entered the 4th year of the project. Before the closure of the centre, our dedicated Supporting Sister volunteers continued to deliver high-quality support services in our women-only centre.

On the 23rd March, following Government guidance, the Aspire women's centre closed to the public and staff began to work from home. This report considers the impact of the pandemic on our *Supporting Sisters* project, and how we adapted provision to support women remotely. As we move towards re-opening the centre and developing sustainable ways of working in a "new normal", we look to consolidate what we've learnt from supporting women during Lockdown.

Director's statement

The year hasn't been without its successes and throughout this period we have seen our coproduction model really come into its own.

The Supporting Sisters programme is once again awarding winning, seeing one of our supporting sister volunteers win Volunteer of the Year and our Volunteer Coordinator awarded Tutor of the Year, both through Durham County Council. We are learning and reflecting all the time how to adapt to change; this period has really shown the strength of our model and approach. None of this would be possible without the unfaltering commitment of the staff team. I would like to thank each and every one of them and all our Supporting Sister volunteers who continue to offer support and are often a lifeline to so many women.

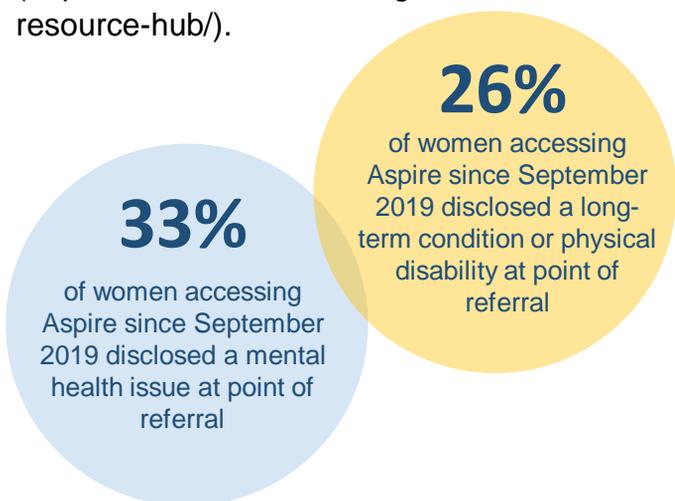
Janice Rokni



Aspire staff virtual team meeting, June 2020

What we know: the impact of Coronavirus on our community

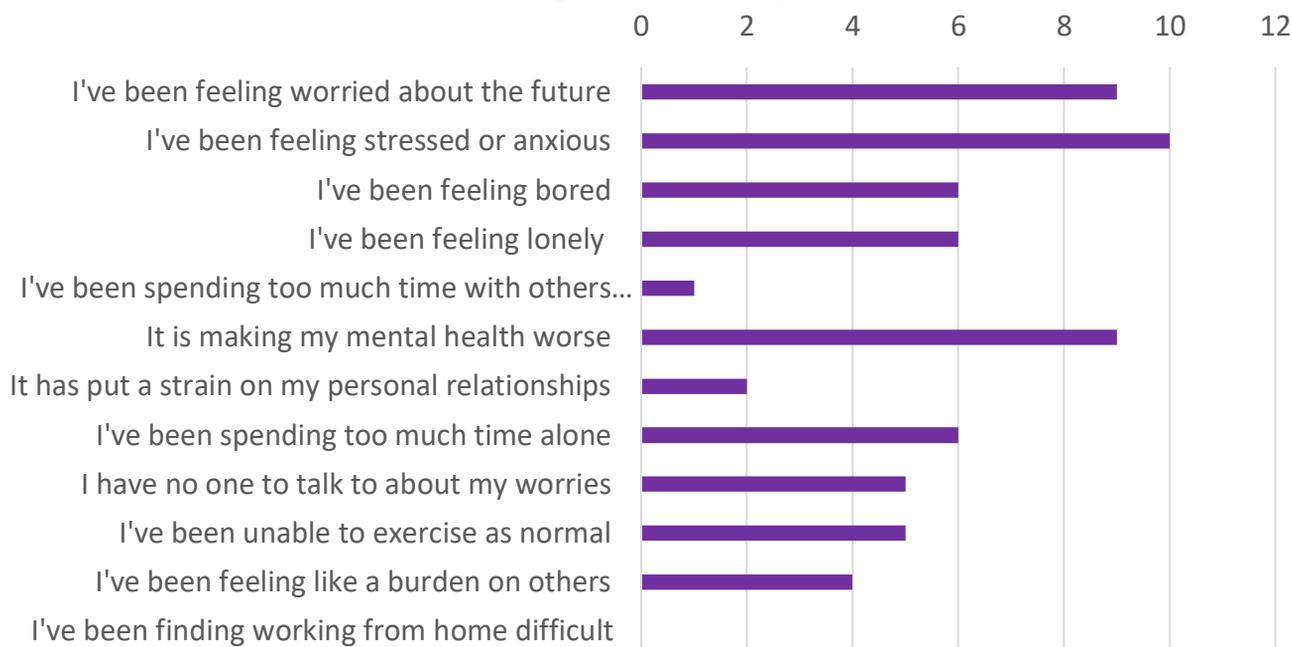
We knew that many of the women we worked with would be among those hit hardest by the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic and Lockdown. National research shows that the pandemic has significantly increased social isolation (<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/coronavirus/loneliness-during-coronavirus>), negatively impacted mental health, and put more women at increased risk of domestic abuse (<https://www.womensaid.org.uk/covid-19-resource-hub/>).



Impact on women's wellbeing

In June 2020, we sent out a survey to women accessing our support groups online. The survey asked a range of questions about accessibility and benefits of online support, as well as questions from the Office of National Statistics survey on the impact of the pandemic.

Question: In which ways has your wellbeing been affected by the Coronavirus pandemic?



Social isolation

Strengthening social networks and support systems is one of Aspire's central aims across all our services. Social interaction was cited as the main reason for referrals from external agencies (based on available data between 01/09/2019-23/03/2020).

We know that decreased mental health and/or shielding due to physical health conditions isolates women further during the pandemic. We also know that social isolation disproportionately affects older people. As older people are at significantly higher risk from the Coronavirus pandemic, the current situation further isolates and limits older people's capacity to connect with other people. 25% of women accessing learning and support services at Aspire are above the age of 65, and nearly half (49%) are over 50.

Service Response

“I just felt totally lost and as if I’d been cast adrift”

- Supporting Sister volunteer on the closure of the centre

The closure of the centre was a huge shock to Aspire staff, volunteers and the women using our services. Our women-only centre was the heart and hub of the Aspire community, and we lacked experience and systems for remote working and online provision. We were determined, however, to adapt and develop our services to ensure we could support women during the pandemic.

Social Media



Staying connected: women share their Lockdown activities on Aspire social media

Throughout the lockdown period, we maintained a strong presence on social media, offering information and guidance, local service updates, social connection and positivity to the women that follow us. Through Facebook in particular, we have been able to sustain a sense of community for women who had been engaged with centre. In the first weeks following the closure, this was our central way of connecting with women who had been using the project. We have increased our reach across all our online platforms, gaining more followers and increasing page traffic, retweets, post ‘likes’ and shares.

Check-in and Chat

On 1st April 2020, we launched a new service, Check-in and Chat, our telephone and email support line. The incoming service runs for 8 hours a week, managed by members of the Aspire staff team, and provides an opportunity for women to access emotional support, information and guidance, and signposting. Supporting Sister volunteers take on referrals from this service and deliver regular befriending to women in need. Check-in and Chat also runs as an outreach service. Many of the women we reached out to have been referred into the Listening Service, befriending, or Support Groups. Although befriending has always been part of our Supporting Sisters training, we did not run a dedicated befriending service in-centre. This aspect of our support provision has been very successful during this period.

32 women

have been contacted through our Check-in and Chat outreach service and

10 women

have accessed regular befriending through this service

Adapting existing services

Our confidential Listening Service is delivered by fully trained Supporting Sister volunteers, providing 1:1 face-to-face and telephone support. This service is designed to be flexible and responsive to women's individual needs, providing one-off appointments and brief interventions as well as longer term support. Since the launch of the *Supporting Sisters* project, demand for the Listening Service has continued to increase.

After a break in provision immediately following the closure of the centre, the Listening Service was re-established as a telephone service. Women who were previously accessing the Listening Service were able to re-engage with support, and the service opened up to new referrals.

12 women have accessed 1:1 support through the Listening Service

Volunteers have offered **99** appointments, providing **more than 80** hours of telephone support since the closure of the centre

Working online

During Lockdown, we established 3 online groups with targeted support for the most vulnerable women. All of our online groups are facilitated by our Supporting Sisters volunteers.

Since launching the groups in May:



Our online groups:

Mature Friends: our longstanding support group for older women

Positive Progress: goal-focused support around resilience, mental health support and self-care

Monday Social: an informal group providing an opportunity for women who attended our weekly Monday drop-in to reconnect and access consistent support

Pre-Pandemic

Our support services include a range of structured and unstructured support groups, a confidential Listening Service, The Women's Wellness Service, and the provision of an on-site creche. Here's a look at what we achieved in the 4th year of the project before the closure of the centre.

Supporting Sister volunteers delivered over

200 hours
of 1:1 support

through the **Listening Service**

16 hours

of group support were
provided each week

and

171 women had

attended **support groups** in centre

Our groups

A diverse range of support groups have been maintained or developed through the *Supporting Sisters* project, facilitated by trained volunteers. Groups aim to improve mental wellbeing and tackle isolation, provision forums for women to develop support networks, gain new skills and engage in new activities. Groups include Singing Sisters, Chat & Craft, Computer Drop-in, Positive Progress, and our weekly Monday and Thursday drop-ins.

Introductory Drop-in

In January 2020, we launched our Introductory Drop-in, a new service designed to support women accessing the centre for the first time. This smaller, more focused group followed a trauma-informed approach in design and delivery, and aimed to provide a supportive entry point into Aspire services for women who may have additional needs, anxieties or concerns.

Credit Union

In June 2019, we partnered with North East First and launched Aspire as a Credit Union collection point. This scheme has been a huge success in centre, and before the closure Supporting Sister volunteers were running a twice-weekly collection point.

Over **50** women were saving
with the scheme

Since Lockdown, our savers have been redirected to our partners at Credit First for further information and guidance, and we have continued to develop our volunteers' skills and expertise with training around online scamming and exploitation.

The Women's Wellness Service

The Women's Wellness Service strengthens the holistic approach of the *Supporting Sisters* project, offering a range of treatments and clinics to promote wellbeing, self-care and relaxation. All of the services are delivered by qualified professionals and are free-of-charge. Before the pandemic, up to 15 massage, reflexology and podiatry clinic appointments were available each week. Between September 2019 and suspension of the service in March 2020:



In November 2019 we conducted a focus group of women who had used the Women's Wellness Service in a range of ways. The conversation focused on self-care, and the participants talked while making a natural body scrub for themselves. This discussion gave us greater insight into the impact of the Women's Wellness service, and the barriers that women face to accessing more mainstream health and wellbeing services.

Touch

For many women, the Wellness Service provided rare opportunities for physical human contact in a safe and trauma-informed environment. The impact of human touch on the health and wellbeing of women was hugely significant. This contact made women feel cared for, and women also reported that it made them "feel seen".

"In some ways, yes, it is a luxury. But it's also a necessity."

- Focus group participant

Women told us that the cost of massage treatments and private clinics elsewhere was a deterrent or barrier to accessing these services, and that the Women's Wellness Service was more accessible because it was free. However, women told us that the *value* of this service went far beyond the fact that it was free.

Self-worth

Women told us that the ethos and atmosphere of Aspire encourages them to value themselves, promoting self-care and self-worth in a way that enables women to engage with services differently. This ethos challenges the notion that self-care is indulgent, and provides a space for women to prioritise their own wellbeing.

Here's what women told us made the Wellness service more accessible:

Non-judgemental

The non-judgmental ethos of Aspire and our staff meant women felt more able to access wellbeing services

Women-only

Our gender-specific provision and women-only centre increased women's confidence to access wellbeing services

One stop shop

The holistic nature of our services, where "everything is under one roof" made wellbeing services more accessible for women

Trust

Women felt comfortable with our Wellness service staff and were able to discuss their concerns openly and seek support.

Coproduction

When Aspire was founded in 2012, at the heart of the initiative was the collective “we” of women in the community. All our services have been designed in recognition of not only what women in the community want and need, but also what they themselves have to offer. The Coronavirus pandemic has highlighted just how integral our volunteers are to all aspects of our service design and delivery.

Supporting sisters

Service Delivery

Our model

- **Volunteers work across the organisation:** administrative positions and front-of-house, fundraising & event organising
- **Peer-led Support Groups** facilitated by Supporting Sisters
- **Befriending and Listening Services** delivered by Supporting Sisters

Service Design

- **Volunteer-led Steering Groups** develop specialist areas of work within the support services
- **Skills, interests and experience** of Supporting Sister volunteers guide service development

Training and development

- **Core volunteer training programme** to develop confidence, skills and resilience in supporting other women
- **Ongoing training and development** opportunities
- Opportunities to develop **specialist areas of interest and expertise**, e.g Domestic Violence and Abuse, Suicide Prevention & Self Harm

Peer Support

- **Peer support** integral to service delivery
- **Peer mentoring** embedded to support volunteer progression in group facilitation
- **Regular group supervision** across support services as well as within specific services such as the Listening Service

Service Evaluation

- Training and information provided on using **evaluation tools**
- Volunteers support engagement with **surveys and questionnaires**
- Volunteers participate in **Focus Groups** for evaluation of services
- **Peer research** opportunities in development



“We didn’t have the centre to go to, but we still had each other, which was lovely. We were still there. We’re still here now, aren’t we!”

- Supporting Sister volunteer

Coproduction and Coronavirus

The pandemic has, of course, had a significant impact on volunteer capacity: it has tested resilience and put up barriers for our volunteers. The process of adapting to new ways of working has also, however, provided opportunities to reflect on, develop and strengthen our coproduced model of support provision. The dedication of our volunteers during this period of unprecedented uncertainty has been incredible. They continue to rise to the challenges, and in many instances exceeded their own expectations of what they were capable of achieving.

What we’ve learnt

Strengthening communication

Regular communication between the Supporting Sister team and Volunteer Coordinator has been vital in order for our volunteers **to stay connected, feel supported and share information.**

Women taking on active roles rely on this to support their own health and wellbeing, and maintain routine and purpose in their lives. The Supporting Sister community has been a source of strength for our volunteers.

Training & new skills

Providing support to women online has required our volunteers to adapt their wealth of knowledge and skills to new platforms, technologies and ways of working. Many of us have never worked online in this way before. It has been essential to provide **further training and support** to enable volunteers to work **safely and confidently** online. A group of staff and volunteers undertook peer-to-peer online support training, and volunteers have had access to ongoing training for specific online platforms.

Since the closure of the centre, 12 volunteers have engaged with meetings, training and delivery online.

We are extremely proud of all our volunteers. This year at the Durham County Council Learning Awards, one of our Supporting Sisters won Volunteer of the Year, and our Volunteer Co-Ordinator won Inspirational Tutor of the year.

To celebrate all the hard work and dedication of our volunteers, we held our first online Volunteer Celebration in July 2020, with all the trimmings!

“I’ve learnt an awful lot – I’ve had to! Nothing beats face-to-face, obviously. But I’ve grown into it.”

- Supporting Sister volunteer

Burnout, Support & self-care

Volunteers needed increased support through the pandemic. Many also faced mental health struggles, increased caring responsibilities, bereavement and isolation due to the Coronavirus pandemic. Some volunteers also took a step back from their roles during the pandemic. Group contact helped volunteers to focus on their own self-care. Volunteers felt that they burnt out more quickly working remotely. It has been essential during this period to ensure that the **development of alternative service provision is volunteer-led** and paced appropriately. In September 2020 we aim to begin training another cohort of Supporting Sister volunteers in order to continue to meet service demands without stretching volunteer capacity.

Support Groups online

Thanks to our dedicated volunteers, our online support groups have been a huge success. Feedback from women attending the groups indicates that, despite the challenges, there are many positive outcomes from online services and also potentially longevity in this alternative provision.

ALL

of our survey respondents
said they would be **likely** or
very likely

to attend an Aspire online support
group **regularly**

91% said they had found it
easy or **very easy**
to access their group online

and **75%**

said they would like to join
more groups
if these were available

Barriers

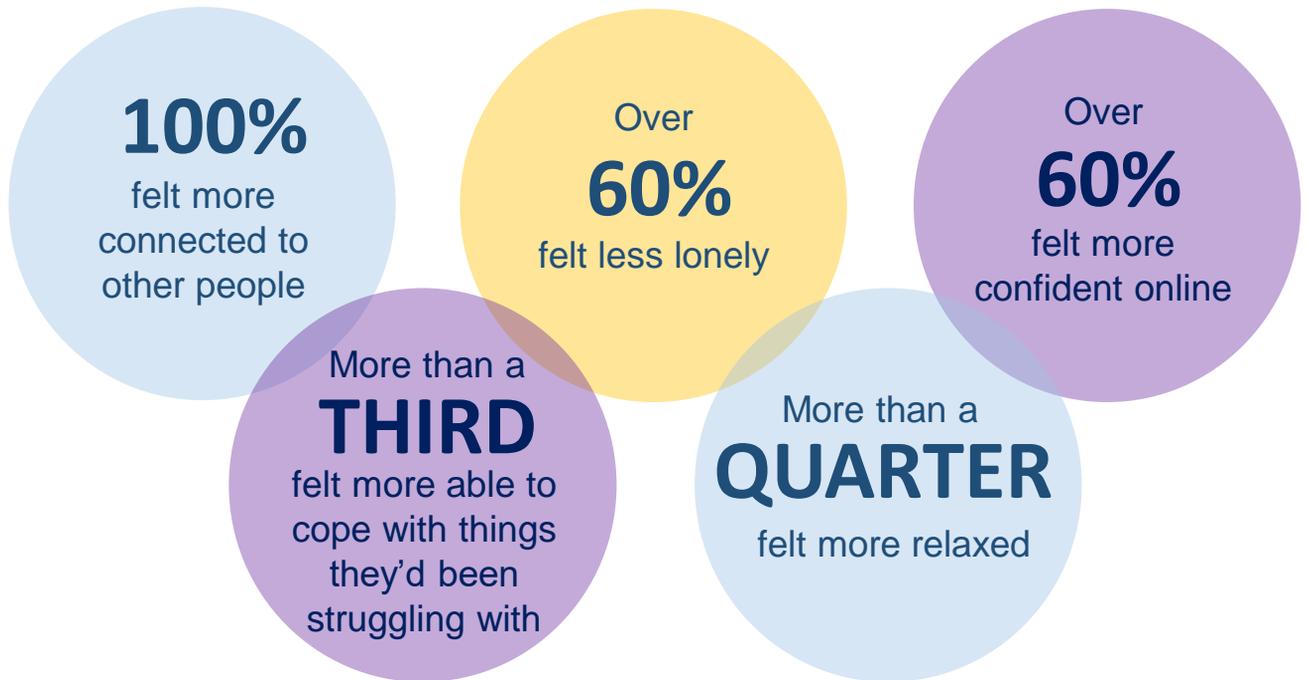
Supporting Sisters provided 1:1 help to women struggling to access online groups, and made referrals for women who needed additional technology. 25% of women who responded to our online support group survey said that their experience had been affected by lack of technology, poor internet connection, or lack of privacy in their homes. These factors also impacted on our volunteers.

For some women, these barriers will mean that they are not able to engage with online support at all, and other still may feel that online support does not meet their needs. Although we have been able to connect some women through telephone support, we know that our reach is limited through online provision. If we compare the number of women attending groups in centre for the first 3 months of the year (117) to the number attending groups online during the last 3 months of the year (25), we see that we have been able to provide for less than 25% of the number of women online.

“My biggest challenge or fear [as a volunteer] is I worry about the women we can’t reach...I know that a lot of them are being supported in other ways, but I still feel maybe a few will have fallen through the net.”

Impact

The women who responded to our survey told us that as a result of attending Aspire online groups:



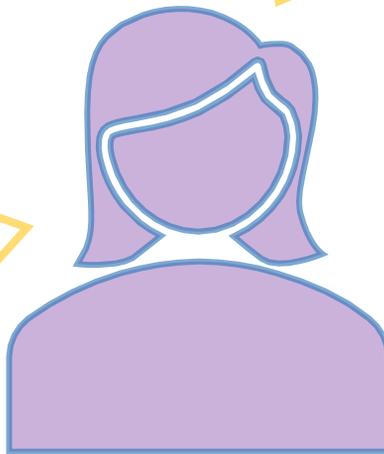
Although working online presents many challenges, and cannot replace face-to-face contact, there are also clearly many benefits and advantages to this alternative provision. Supporting Sisters told us that working with smaller numbers of women online increased focus and connection within the groups, allowing for more intensive support. Volunteers felt that women were able to share more openly and were developing confidence in smaller, more structured groups online.

"The Aspire group online has been a lifeline to me"
- Survey respondent

"It's even more important now because people are feeling isolated. And the whole point of the group is that people get to realise that they're not alone."
- Supporting Sister

"We can still reach more women, women who can't get into the centre... [Working online] is something we can carry on doing.. So there's a lot of positives come out of it."
- Supporting Sister

"Aspire groups online are a great help. They are a lovely bunch of people."
- Survey respondent



Volunteer of the Year

Merchai works across the learning and support services at Aspire in a range of roles. As a Supporting Sister volunteer, she is a Group Lead, facilitating drop-in support sessions in centre and online. Merchai is also actively involved in the coproduction of support services, and has joined the working group for the development of our domestic violence and abuse support. She is passionate about Psychology and Criminology, and has supported on several learning courses. She is also on the fundraising committee.

“Merchai is an inspiration to everyone as she is positive, supportive and caring, always noticing if any woman is in real need of support and encouragement. She addresses their needs without seeking any recognition for herself. It doesn't matter who the person is, they are all important to her and she is non-judgemental and inclusive to everyone.” – Woman attending group



Merchai with her award

Merchai found out about Aspire from her therapist at Talking Changes, and first came to centre in 2018. Merchai had struggled with her mental health for many years, but was determined to find ways to help her manage the debilitating effects of anxiety and depression. Coming to Aspire for the first time was a huge step for Merchai, and she decided to concentrate on training and learning opportunities in centre, to give her structure and focus. In January 2019, Merchai began her training to become a Supporting Sister volunteer, and also enrolled on the Psychology course at Aspire. As the tutors recognised her potential and enthusiasm and continued to encourage her, Merchai's confidence grew. Merchai brings a wealth of personal experience, knowledge and skills to her role as a Supporting Sister. She is practical, pro-active, and passionate about empowering and supporting other women in Aspire groups. Since starting to facilitate our drop-ins, Merchai has had a huge impact on women attending the groups. Merchai has continued to support women through Lockdown, facilitating our online Monday Social Group. Her dedication to the women she supports has been abundantly clear, and she has risen to, and embraced, the challenges of working online. Merchai has found that the smaller, more intimate online sessions have enabled her to develop her skills even further, and also feels that many of the women attending have benefited from this more focused support. Merchai hopes to continue supporting other women through the Aspire groups, and also to continue her studies towards her goal of becoming a Criminal Psychologist.

We are hugely proud of what Merchai has accomplished since first coming to Aspire, and so pleased that she won this year's Durham County Council Learner Awards Volunteer of the Year. Merchai is an asset to Aspire, and to the Supporting Sisters team. On the subject of winning Volunteer of the Year, when asked if there was anything else she would like to add, Merchai had this to say:

“Only that the award's not just for me, it's for the Supporting Sisters because we do all support each other in Aspire. They've helped me, you know, they've guided me, and if they hadn't have guided me, would I be where I am now? There's no 'I' in team, but there is in Sisters.”

Domestic violence

Lockdown put more women at increased risk of domestic violence and abuse, as well as retriggering trauma for many women with historic experiences of domestic and sexual violence.

When the centre closed, we were undertaking a review of our support for victims/survivors of domestic and sexual violence, to consolidate our approach across the organisation and explore further areas for development. Since the closure of the centre, we have continued to reflect on, strengthen and develop our work in this area.

DVA support programme

This year, we piloted our first in-house Domestic Violence and Abuse Support programme. The 10-week programme, delivered by an experienced external facilitator, was run 3 times in centre and 10 women attended. The group offered women a space to explore patterns of abusive behaviour, and share and reflect on their own experiences.

Training and Awareness-Raising

Consciousness-raising has a long history within the women's sector, and can be a powerful tool for change, both on a societal level and for individual women. At Aspire, we hope that by facilitating conversation, offering women opportunities to learn and reflect, that they will feel less alone with their experiences and more able to seek help and support. In November 2019, we hosted a series of screenings of Open Clasp's powerful piece, Rattlesnake. 25(?) women were able to see the film in centre, and support was available following the post-screening discussions.

It's All About... online event

In August 2020, Supporting Sisters facilitated our first online It's All About DVA drop-in. 10 women attended this informal group to share experiences, seek support and gain further information for signposting and specialist provision. Feedback from this event was very positive, and women felt that the online forum was well suited to this group, enabling women who may not have been able or felt confident enough to attend the centre to seek support. These events will now be held online on a monthly basis.

Durham PCC

In July 2020 we were awarded funding through the Durham Police and Crime Commissioner to offer practical support to victims/survivors during the pandemic. So far, 18 women have received our Wellbeing and Household help packs.

DVASteering Group

A Domestic Violence and Abuse Steering Group of staff and volunteers has now been established, following our coproduction model. Supporting Sisters will bring their skills, knowledge, and lived experience to influence how our services develop to support victims/survivors both in centre and online.

Looking ahead

As we move into the final year of the programme we are exploring ways to sustain these much needed services in these ever changing times. We know we have a robust strengths-based model that takes a trauma informed approach to ensure women at risk feel safe and heard whilst providing person-centred services. We also know that we need to continue to address the additional challenges we face as a result of Covid-19, and consider how we take this model forward.



Remote service provision

We will continue to develop our online and remote services to ensure that women have access to support regardless of local or national restrictions. We will continue to monitor and evaluate these services to ensure they meet the needs of women in our community, and explore ways to make online support more widely accessible.



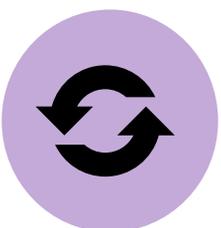
Volunteering

We will continue to support our volunteers in design and delivery of services. We are committed to engaging and training new volunteers to increase capacity and ensure our services are sustainable. Our coproduction model will continue to amplify the voices of women with lived experiences in the development of our provision.



Reintroduction of face-to-face delivery

We will continue to review our provision alongside local and national guidelines, in order to reintroduce face-to-face support when it is safe to do so. We are committed to using our learning from Lockdown to enhance service delivery in-centre when face-to-face support services resume.



Sustainability

As we enter the final year of the Big Lottery Community funded project, we are committed to identifying further opportunities to ensure a robust and sustainable model for funding our services beyond the end of the Supporting Sisters project.