



Personal Outcomes Stories during COVID: Learning from practice

Your role and organisation: Kate McCormack, Manager, Fife Women's Aid



How have you been able to keep a focus on what matters to people during COVID?

As an organisation, Fife Women's Aid is committed to putting the views and wishes of the women and children at the centre of our work. This has continued during the response to Covid-19. As key workers, we have continued to deliver a service to women and children experiencing domestic abuse. This has included face to face contact for essential visits and developing new ways of maintaining contact remotely. This contact has allowed us to continue to ask people what is important to them during lockdown so that we can adapt and respond appropriately.

(artwork created by a woman using the service)

What have you had to do differently and what made this possible?

There has been an increased demand for refuge during lockdown. We have taken on new refuge accommodation to be able to meet some of this need. Working in partnership with Fife Council has enabled this to happen. We have also had to find ways of dealing with other situations to free up existing refuge accommodation. For example, where one woman isolated with her daughter in England, Fife Council quickly identified storage facilities for her belongings so that we could keep her items safe while allowing another family to make use of the safe accommodation. Strong partnership working has provided a foundation for responding to meet the needs of families during lockdown.

As an organisation we have had to adapt to remote working. This has included making sure the correct IT infrastructure is in place to make this possible as well as ensuring communication and support for staff is in place while working differently. Additional Scottish Government funding has enabled us to purchase necessary equipment and we have worked hard to get policies and procedures in place quickly to provide a framework for practice. We recognised that support for staff is needed more than ever and have ensured that the external support we provide continues to be available, with staff able to choose whether they access this by video or telephone.

We have also started to deliver some services online, providing group work for women and children. To facilitate this in refuge, we have installed internet access. This was made possible by generous donations we received from the local community, including the

Lumsden Club at the University of St Andrews and Rotary Clubs in Fife and a fast response and other support from an IT company. They provided us with equipment within less than a week of placing the order as they recognised the difference being connected would make to a vulnerable client group. We also received funding to provide tablets for families where access to equipment was a barrier to participation.

All of this has allowed us to offer a range of groups, including self-care and Write to Recovery groups for women; we are also about to begin a group work programme with children who have experienced domestic abuse. This allows us to provide support, promote self-management and encourage peer support at a time when families are more isolated than ever. Changing practice in this way has required us to learn technical skills as well as to do work with women and children in advance of participating in groups so that they are able to keep themselves safe while participating virtually. While we offered group work for women prior to the pandemic, many faced barriers to participation, such as transport and travel. The level of interest in virtual group work far exceeds our experience of face to face sessions.

What have you noticed that has been better?

Many of the changes that have been made have resulted in a positive outcome, including:

The organisation now has the infrastructure to operate in a more flexible way; this will continue to benefit both staff and service users.

We had a waiting list for refuge prior to the pandemic. While this remains the case, the amount of refuge spaces available in Fife has increased as a direct result of the pandemic. We are also actively engaged in looking at ways of improving the pathway to permanent accommodation for families in refuge which will increase availability of current stock. This is one example of the way in which the impact of covid-19 has led to improved working relationships and partnerships.

Media coverage of the impact of lockdown on people experiencing domestic abuse has resulted in increased public awareness. This has resulted in increased donations, both monetary and offers of support, including solicitors offering to work pro bono to assist during this time.

Awareness of the impact of lockdown for families experiencing domestic abuse has highlighted the significance of digital exclusion. This has resulted in tangible changes taking place quickly, such as installation of internet access in refuge accommodation and the provision of equipment for families where this was a barrier to participation. This was essential for children who were required to continue their education from home as well as for women to maintain contact with key people, such as family and professionals providing support. Some examples of the difference this has made include:

One woman said that she had not been able to afford the data package on her phone while in refuge and has been unable to have video calls with her family members during lockdown. This led to her feeling isolated as she has been unable to see them in person. She is now able to see them via video and has been part of family quizzes.

Another woman said that having internet has made a huge difference as her children spent time at their dad's house as a direct result of there being no internet in the refuge.

Another woman working from home during lockdown had to use a pay as you go contract to enable her to maintain her job. This was extremely costly; she said she has been spending 'a small fortune' on data bundles.

Access to some areas of service delivery has improved. Group work is an example of this, whereby using a different method of delivery has resulted in increased access. While this does not replace the need for direct contact, it has highlighted that offering a range of ways of delivering services improves access.

How did this make you feel?

I feel positive about the changes that have been made and enthusiastic about further changes to come which will improve the way we work as an organisation and as partnerships across Fife and the area of domestic abuse. However, I remain concerned about the women and children we have not reached during this time and anticipate demand for services increasing as lockdown eases.

What have you learned through this?

I've learned that a crisis like this can galvanise change and bring out a flexibility in the way we practice (both internally as an organisation and within wider partnerships) that benefits the families we work with. Barriers have quickly been overcome to achieve positive outcomes and working relationships have been strengthened. I've learned that we can be creative about the way we work and want this to continue so that it becomes embedded rather than being in response to an international crisis.