



## My Sister's Place: Domestic Violence Intensive Response Team – June 2021

**Organisation name:** My Sister's Place

**Project name:** Domestic Violence Intensive Response Team

**Location:** Middlesbrough, England

**Grant amount:** £499,500

**Award date and duration:** 2015, 5 years

**Project context:** My Sister's Place provide independent advice and support to women experiencing domestic violence.

**Project aims:** The aims of this grant were to increase capacity, adapt their delivery model to provide more holistic support to women, build capacity and improve the quality of support they offer.

### Project aims

My Sister's Place was established in 2002, and provides an independent specialist 'one stop shop' of advice and support for women aged 16 and over who have experienced or are experiencing domestic violence. They received a grant of approximately £499,500 in 2015, ending in April 2020, in order to support the development of the Domestic Violence Intensive Response Team.

The aim of this grant was to embed more holistic support for the women they help. Previously they had taken a risk-focused approach which emphasised safeguarding and helping women to manage crisis points, but they wanted to expand this into a more needs-led approach. This encompassed combining the advice and support on domestic violence with advice and support with practical needs, and increased capacity to make referrals to counselling, to more fully support women in their recovery from abuse.

## About the grant

The National Lottery Community Fund grant funded their Domestic Violence Intensive Support Team and underpinned a shift in the nature of the service to a more needs-led approach. They had always been risk-focused, with the emphasis on safeguarding and helping women to manage crisis points such as interactions with the criminal justice system. Alongside this critical work, they wanted to offer more practical support and improve access to counselling so that they were taking a more holistic approach to meeting women's needs. The grant helped them to achieve this through:

- **Employing staff:** The funding contributed towards employment of three practical support workers called Life Enhancement Skills Advisers (LESAs) who worked alongside their team of Independent Domestic Violence Advocates (IDVAs).
- **Funding counselling:** The grant allowed them to support more counselling places through their volunteer counselling service.
- **Developing their service model:** The grant allowed them to move from a service focusing on supporting women's immediate needs, to one which was more holistic and focused on a model of empowerment.

## Project set up and delivery

My Sister's Place had previously offered support through Independent Domestic Violence Advocates (IDVAs) whose focus was mainly on the safeguarding and criminal justice aspects of supporting victims of domestic violence. Introducing more practical support workers, working alongside the specialist domestic violence staff, meant they could take a more holistic approach to meeting women's needs. In particular, they could provide tailored, face-to-face, 1-2-1 advice on more immediate practical needs like housing, benefits, budgeting and finance. Anne, a support worker whose role was funded through The National Lottery Community Fund grant, gave examples of the types of activities they would help women with: things like finding them a safe place to stay through making a referral to housing support; going with them to appointments; helping them set up new gas and electricity services and access grants for furniture; making sure they had access to the benefits they were entitled to; and helping them to set up their own bank accounts.

"Basically everything to support them in their transition to independent living."  
**Anne\***, support worker

“They referred me to Citizen’s Advice and counselling. They helped me to get a panic button and CCTV installed and a guard across my letterbox. They came to the court with me so that I could look around to see how it was set up, and they got screens put up so I felt more reassured about it.”  
**woman supported by the service**

The frequency of meetings depended on the women’s needs. Faye, another support worker, described how she might meet some women 2-3 times per week, others

“We were trying to prevent that revolving door cycle by helping them to get to a place where they don’t come need to come back.”  
**Faye\*, support worker**

once per week, reducing in frequency as they became more independent. The key aim of providing the practical support alongside the domestic violence

support was to help women to get to a place where they can be independent of the service.

They also set up the Stepping Stones peer support group which has six to eight women involved at any one time, and expanded their volunteer capacity through work placements in their charity shop and additional counselling places.

## Project impact

### Key highlights

Numbers supported

- 8,000-9,000 women supported during the lifetime of the grant

Key impacts

- Increased capacity
- Enhanced delivery model
- Improved quality through more holistic support
- Women better protected from harm, violence and abuse; improved mental health and well-being; improved self-esteem and resilience

Website

<https://www.mysistersplace.org.uk>

Michelle, the Chief Officer, regarded The National Lottery Community Fund grant as being key to capacity-building within the organisation and helping them to develop how they work with women and partner organisations.

“It acted as a catalyst for development and growth within the organisation.”

**Michelle, Chief Officer**

As part of this, they refined their outcomes framework so they were better at measuring health and wellbeing outcomes. The grant acted as a foundation for them to develop other parts of the organisation such as their volunteer pathways, counselling placements, and partnerships with other organisations like Women’s Aid. They have grown substantially since the grant, shifting from employing 15-20 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) staff to around 35 FTEs now.

Grant funding improved their capacity to support women and provide a more responsive service.

“I definitely had the feeling we could offer more due to the extra capacity. If someone needs to go to the council’s homelessness service it makes such a difference to be able to say ‘I can come with you, let’s go now’ – those things have a huge impact, that you can act ‘in the moment’.” **Faye\*, support worker**

## **Women were better protected from harm, violence or abuse**

Independent Domestic Violence Advocates (IDVAs) are women’s first point of contact with the service. They provide advice on domestic violence support and legal processes, and support women through the criminal justice system if their case is being taken to court. For example, they act as a ‘go-between’ between the court process and the woman if they are taking out a restraining order. They deal with high-risk safeguarding referrals until the point at which the risk is gone or reduced to a level that the woman can manage on her own. If there is a need for broader support like benefits advice or housing support to enable this, they work together with support workers who can offer this type of advice and help with tasks like arranging a removal van.

“That’s huge, it has a massive impact. We can ask a woman to do certain things to reduce her risk, like contacting the police, but she needs to be in situation where she’s ready to make that move. There could be a million and one reasons why she’s not calling the police, and the support worker can iron those out, and help someone to manage that so it’s no longer a reason for them to stay. I can then point them to a place to make that person safe.” **Caroline\*, IDVA**

Caroline\* gave an example of one lady who was a victim of domestic abuse by her partner, with whom she shared a joint tenancy agreement. She is disabled and her flat has certain adaptations which make it difficult for her to move. Through My Sister's Place, she got support to navigate the criminal justice system and bring her case to court, as well as to help her negotiate a transfer of the tenancy into her own name, rather than terminate it as usually happens in these circumstances. This has meant she can stay in her home.

This practical help was instrumental in supporting women towards a safer and more independent life:

"The main difference is ultimately it has enabled women to stay away from their partners. Sometimes it feels to them like there are too many hurdles in the way and if someone is there helping them overcome those, they are less likely to return to the abusive relationship – they can see they can live independently and there's a light at the end of the tunnel. I mean, it's life-changing for these women to feel safe in their own home." **Anne\*, support worker**

### **Financial and material well-being improved**

Some of the women who use the service are victims of economic abuse where their partners have taken control over their access to money or run up large debts. Women receive financial and benefits advice through the project, including help to open a new bank account if needed or to transfer Child Benefit or Universal Credit payments into their name.

### **Mental health and well-being was better**

The grant funded more counselling placements so that women could be signposted to make appointments with the service if needed.

Staff at My Sister's Place described how women were encouraged to make their own counselling appointments, as they were then

more motivated to attend – the missed appointment rate was higher when staff were making the appointments. Through their improved outcomes framework they have found that 70% of women report improved mental health and wellbeing as a result of the support they have received.

"Without funding from the Community Fund we wouldn't have been able to support and recruit as many counselling placements as we have done."  
**Michelle, Chief Officer**

## Confidence, self-esteem and resilience were improved

Offering support had a positive impact on women's self-esteem and resilience. In addition, some of the women supported by My Sister's Place have set up a peer

"I don't know where I'd be if it wasn't for them encouraging me, believing me, and making me believe there would be an outcome to it in the end, I was about to give up."

woman supported by the service

support group. They meet up to exercise and go for walks, have coffee, and take part in other social activities, which helps build up their confidence.

Some women who have been supported by the service have come

back later to volunteer, although they have to wait for two years so as not to trigger any trauma from reliving their past experiences. There are also opportunities to volunteer in the charity shop, which helps women build skills and work experience as well as confidence.

## Overall reflections

The organisational development and service improvements underpinned by the grant had a positive impact on support that women could access, offering them practical and emotional support alongside specialist advice on dealing with domestic abuse and navigating the criminal justice system. Extra counselling places meant that more women could access this support if they wanted it, with seven in ten reporting improved mental health and well-being. Practical help from support workers allowed specialist domestic violence advisers to focus on safeguarding and risk – as one put it – “it allows me to [do my job], if I know she is getting support, she can hear my concerns and not be swamped with that other practical stuff.”

## About the case study

As part of this case study, IFF Research spoke to Michelle, CO of My Sister's Place; Anne\* and Faye\*, two Life Enhancement Skills Advisers who had been employed through the grant; Caroline\*, an Independent Domestic Violence Advocate; and a survivor of domestic abuse who received support from the project. \*Names have been changed.