



aspire | learning
support
wellbeing

Supporting sisters

Project Evaluation

2016 - 2021



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DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Over the last 5 years Aspire has significantly extended its reach and offer to women in need and those impacted by the growing inequalities women face. We have increased our provision to include extensive holistic, trauma informed services of personal centred support, wellbeing and self care initiatives and specifically informed interventions to support women experiencing or at risk of domestic abuse, sexual violence, self harm and suicide which have been further impacted by the pandemic as more women have become at risk of domestic abuse.



We have significantly increased our capacity by developing our peer led strength based model with our support services now designed, delivered and co produced by our award winning “Supporting Sisters” volunteers who have transformed our services. Many women describe aspire as “like a family” to them and it’s this sense of belonging that supports women to feel safe, engage in services but also empowered to influence and inform services. As they gain confidence through acceptance women become more active citizens building capacity in their local communities. Many of our Supporting Sisters’ have themselves accessed services and have gone on to attend our comprehensive training programme, developing their skill base alongside drawing on their lived experiences to empathise and support other women.

On behalf of the women, staff and volunteers I would like to extend our sincere thanks to the National Lottery Community Fund for not only funding this work but all the additional support they have provided, supporting us to make a difference to the lives of so many women, their children and families.

We hope you enjoy reading this comprehensive evaluation, impact report and look forward to continuing to provide these much needed gender specific services.

Janice Rokni
Director - Co founder.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

About Supporting Sisters

Aspire Learning, Support and Wellbeing offers personal development, training and learning opportunities for women in a safe, supportive and gender-specific environment. Aspire's central aim is to empower women to stay well, feel supported, and ultimately live the lives they want to live. Launched in 2016, Supporting Sisters is a 5-year Big Lottery Community Fund Women and Girls Initiative funded project, which expands our provision to integrate a range of holistic support and wellbeing services alongside our established learning programme.

About this report

This report evaluates the efficacy of the Supporting Sisters project in achieving 5 core objectives: to improve women's mental and physical health, strengthen women's social networks, increase women's skills and confidence to access education and training, and support women to develop marketable skills through volunteering opportunities. The report considers the impact of the Supporting Sisters project on the lives of women using the services and our volunteers. The report considers the project's trajectory, and the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on how Aspire's support services have developed.

Key findings

The Supporting Sisters project has been hugely successfully, and throughout the 5 years of the project Aspire has strengthened and developed person-centred service provision to meet the needs of women in the community. Aspire's holistic approach to service provision is fundamental to achieving the central objectives of the project. Across all of our work, activities and services, Aspire's trauma-informed and strengths-based approach provides the foundation for the key mechanisms of change. Supporting Sisters services centralise relationship-building and peer support in a safe, supportive and women-centred environment that gives women choice and agency to determine their own trajectory.



Key findings

Aspire services positively support women's mental health: providing structure and routine, building resilience and a sense of self-worth through consistent, accessible and enjoyable peer-led provision.

The Women's Wellness Service directly supports improved physical health. Aspire's holistic approach has wider impacts on women's wellbeing: promoting self-care and supporting women to prioritise their health and wellbeing, maintain healthier lifestyles and have increased confidence to access healthcare provision.

Aspire services prioritise relationship-building, and peer-led provision supports positive and constructive relationships enabling women to feel and be more socially connected.

A strengths-based approach supports women to gain confidence and self-efficacy: women feel supported to try new things and develop personal aspirations

Volunteering as a Supporting Sister has wide-reaching outcomes for women, regardless of the roles they take on within the organisation. Our collaborative approach empowers women to engage with all aspects of service design and delivery. Robust training and person-centred volunteer support enables women to deliver high-quality peer-led services.

Project overview

SUPPORTING SISTERS

Aspire Learning, Support and Wellbeing offers personal development, training and learning opportunities for women in a safe, supportive and gender-specific environment. Established and sustained by women in the community, Aspire provides person-centred services to support women to overcome barriers, develop skills, and gain confidence and agency in their own lives. Launched in September 2016, Aspire's *Supporting Sisters* project has been funded for the last 5 years by the Big Lottery Community Fund Women and Girls Initiative. *Supporting Sisters* expands our provision to integrate a range of holistic support and wellbeing services alongside our established learning programme. Aspire support services are co-designed and delivered by women, for women; as part of the *Supporting Sisters* project we established an extensive volunteer training programme in order to develop peer-led support provision.

Supporting Sisters also aimed to raise Aspire's profile, strengthen partnership working and share good practice for a more sustainable women's sector, alongside improving evidencing across the organisation.

Project activities:

- Volunteer training programme
- Peer-led 1:1 Listening Service
- The Women's Wellness Service
- A range of peer-led structured and unstructured support groups
- Provision of an on-site creche

Aspire's central aim is to empower women to stay well, feel supported, and ultimately live the lives they want to lead. Our strengths-based, trauma-informed model of holistic learning, support and wellbeing services aims to enable women to build resilience, recognise their own strengths and reach their potential (see Theory of Change in Appendix A). We identified 5 core outcomes for the *Supporting Sisters* project:

- Women will have marketable skills through volunteering
- Women will develop the skills and confidence to access training and education opportunities
- Women will have improved mental health
- Women will have improved physical health
- Women will have strong social networks, including those from rural areas and from low-income households



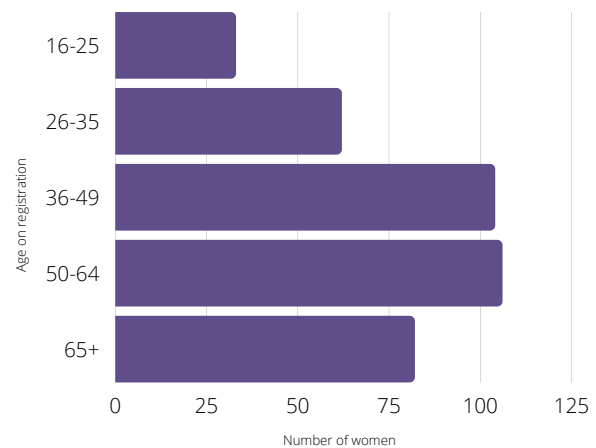
BACKGROUND

Of the 12 local authorities across the North East of England, County Durham is the most deprived in the region in terms of both income and employment deprivation. In the national context, the population of County Durham exceeds national averages across England and Wales for people in receipt of incapacity benefit, employment support, disability living allowance, pension credits and income support. Evidence suggests that 36% of people in Chester-le-Street live within the top 30% of the most deprived areas in the locality, and 18.8% of households in the district are in fuel poverty.¹ 40% of women accessing support services at Aspire indicated that they were **unemployed** at point of referral, and a further **20%** of women were **retired**. (Unless otherwise stated, demographics data is based on 443 women registered on new database between September 2019 – August 2021).

Women attending the centre come from a range of backgrounds, and present with a range of support needs and life experiences. Many have mental health issues (49%), long-term conditions (16%) and/or physical disabilities (15%). Some face multiple disadvantage and may present with “complex needs”.² Taking a ‘life course’³ approach, we recognise that many of the women involved with Aspire have had cumulative, negative life experiences including physical

and/or sexual abuse as children, neglect, negative school experiences, being in care, and experiences of domestic abuse and/or sexual violence as adults. As a result of these experiences and limited social mobility, many women in the community continue to experience disadvantage, contributing to women having low self-worth, poor self-care and a lack of aspiration. *Supporting Sisters* services operate with an open-door policy, in recognition that specific referral criteria can act as a further barrier for many women accessing services. 10% of women accessing support services identified themselves as carers; 14% identified as lone parents.

Age groups of women using support services



Ethnicity of women using support services

White British	81.04%
Other White background	0.90%
White and Black African	0.23%
White and Black Caribbean	0.23%
White and Asian	0.23%
Other Mixed background	1.35%
Indian	0.23%
Bangladeshi	0.45%
Pakistani	0.23%
Other Asian background	0.23%
Other ethnic background	0.23%
Not disclosed/Prefer not to say	14.65%

1. Chester-Le-Street Area Profile, 2012

2. McNeish, D ; Scott, S; Sosenko, F; Johnsen, S (2016) *Women and Girls Facing Severe and Multiple Disadvantage: Interim Report*. Lankelly Chase Foundation

3. McNeish, D and Scott, S (2014) *Women and Girls at Risk: Evidence Across the Life Course*. Lankelly Chase Foundation

EVALUATION OVERVIEW

Main objectives of the evaluation

- Impact:** to evaluate the effectiveness of the *Supporting Sisters* project in achieving the 5 central outcomes (see p.3)
- Process:** to evaluate the implementation and development of activities in relation to the project as initially proposed
- Evidence:** to improve and develop data collection within the organisation to build a strong evidence base for service model
- Learning:** to use this evidence to identify key learning and reflection points to support an effective and sustainable service delivery model beyond the end of the funded project

Methods

Mixed qualitative and quantitative data collection methods were used throughout this evaluation.

Demographics data was collated from information collected at point of referral. Outputs were tracked across all activities via our online database to provide reliable quantitative data on service uptake and engagement. Feedback forms and online surveys have been used where appropriate to support outcomes measurement. Qualitative data has also been collected through a series of facilitated focus groups and 1:1 interviews with women currently accessing support services, women who have exited the project, and volunteers.

Limitations

Following an interim review in 2019, many of the existing data collection tools were updated, along with the introduction of a new online database. As a result, none of the

feedback tools have been used consistently throughout the 5 years of the project. The efficacy and consistency of feedback measures implemented after the Interim Review was also significantly impacted by the Coronavirus Pandemic; some of these tools, such as the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS), which was introduced into the Listening Service, have not yielded sufficient, substantial data as a result of service interruptions. Qualitative data collection also faced limitations: the launch of our peer-led research project, *Sister Stories*, was postponed following the first Lockdown, and it was not possible to resume this project due to volunteer capacity during the pandemic. As all of the 1:1 interviews, and several of the focus groups, were conducted during the pandemic, this unprecedented situation inevitably impacted on the scope of the evaluative work and who was able to participate.

5 years at a glance

Year 1

Supporting Sisters project launch. **99 women** access **group support** and more than **50 women** have treatments through the **Women's Wellness Service**

Year 2

Over **200 new referrals** are made into support services. A **new weekly drop-in** session is introduced to meet demand and **Listening Service** appointments offered increase by **130%**.

Year 3

The Women's Wellness Service doubles capacity to provide weekly treatments, with over **650 appointments** taken up. More than **200 women** access **Support Groups**. Aspire is awarded the **County Durham Kite Mark award** in recognition of the excellent volunteer training programme and **2 new staff members join the team**.

Year 4 (Pre-pandemic)

16 hours of group support are provided every week. Over **50 women** save with the **Credit Union scheme** and volunteers provide over **200 hours of 1:1 support** in the Listening Service. Our **Partnership Development Worker** joins the team.

Year 4 (Lockdown)

The centre closes on 23rd March 2020. We introduce a new **telephone befriending** and outreach service. **Listening Service** appointments are provided remotely to **12 women**. **3 online, peer-led support groups** are launched: **25 women** access groups.

Year 5

A **new post** is created to support direct delivery. **Targeted support groups** are launched in centre and continue online, with **more than 50 women** accessing group support through this blended delivery model. **40 women** return to the centre to access **podiatry and holistic therapy treatments**. More than **30 women** access **telephone befriending**, and volunteers provide more than **600 hours of 1:1 support**.

*Supporting Sisters***KEY
FINDINGS****650**

women have accessed support services through *Supporting Sisters* since the launch of the project

The core outcomes of the *Supporting Sisters* project are deeply interconnected, and therefore Aspire's holistic approach to service provision is fundamental to achieving our objectives to improve women's mental and physical health, strengthen women's social networks, increase women's skills and confidence to access education and training, and support women to develop marketable skills through volunteering opportunities. Across all of our projects, activities and services, Aspire's trauma-informed and strengths-based approach provides the foundation for the key mechanisms of change. *Supporting Sisters* services centralise relationship-building and peer support in a safe, supportive and women-centred environment that gives women choice and agency to determine their own trajectory. Women describe a "knock-on effect" from attending the centre; for many women, coming to Aspire acted as a catalyst to feeling they could make changes in other areas of their lives. Women felt that coming to Aspire motivated them to tackle other barriers they faced and seek support, increased their capacity for action, and gave them a space for reflection:

"It's like a 'kick-start'. It helps you look at yourself, look at other aspects of yourself."

Women's Centres provide unique environments that promote women's empowerment, agency and self-efficacy⁵, which underpins all of our work at Aspire. Whether women actively sought out gender-specific services, or experienced women-centred provision for the first time at Aspire, the benefits of a women-only environment were voiced throughout focus groups, interviews and reflection sessions.

"It was overwhelming because, like, connecting with women – I'd never had a big input with women in my life... So, I was a bit on edge, going, I didn't know what to expect... But it was all different types of women from all different walks of life. And I felt like I did fit there. It's the only place in my life where I've felt I've fitted in somewhere. Because I'd never fitted in nowhere."

5. Frost, S. and Scott, S. (2019) Why Women's Centres Work: An Evidence Briefing. DMSS Research 3.

Mental health

Women felt that they could attend Aspire free from judgement, and that they would be accepted as they were when they came through the doors. Peer support creates a strong sense of community and solidarity, enabling women to gain resilience and develop coping strategies as a result of building positive relationships in a safe environment. Within the Aspire community, women recognised their own strengths and felt valued, which were key mechanisms of change supporting improved mental health and wellbeing. In-centre activities provide structure, routine and purpose in women's lives, supporting improved mental health.

“I was battling, like, with just my mental health as well. I was just up and down... But just waking up in the morning and thinking, *oh, you know what, I'm going to go to Aspire today, and I'm going to mingle with other mothers, you know? I'm going to do a course and I'm going to enjoy it. So I used to look forward to going, to going every week.*”

Physical health

The Women's Wellness Service directly supports improved physical health for women at Aspire, and our holistic approach has a wider impact on women's wellbeing, promoting positive outcomes for physical health. Increasing self-worth means that women value themselves and their own self-care more: women prioritise their health and wellbeing, maintain healthier lifestyles and have increased confidence to access healthcare provision.

“I didn't know what self-care was until I started coming to Aspire.”

Social networks

All of our services prioritise relationships, and Supporting Sisters is founded on peer-led support. In the centre, women are able to develop positive and constructive relationships with one another, tackling social isolation and anxiety, and fostering a sense of community.

“It was a safe environment. Just meeting all these people with different backgrounds. You know, we all have our own problems and stuff but when we're under one roof there's just this powerful force, like – you know what? It doesn't matter, whatever you're going through at this moment, but we're in here, we're all together, let's just hold each other together and let's see what we can come up with.”

Skills and confidence

Self-worth and self-efficacy are not only key for increasing women's access to training and education, but are also vital pathways for all of our core objectives. Women need to be able to recognise their own strengths and abilities in order to develop new skills and have the confidence to try new things, take risks and nurture their aspirations. A key finding from the Supporting Sisters evaluation was that Aspire's strengths-based approach was central to supporting women's sense of self-efficacy. Self-worth was identified as a defining outcome for women attending the centre, across all of our services, activities and provision.

“Having people believe in you [was the most important thing for me]. That was it. Top and bottom of it, that was it. [At Aspire] they would, like, reinforce that of course you can do that, you know? Of course you can do this, you know?”

1. Chester-Le-Street Area Profile, 2012

2. McNeish, D ; Scott, S; Sosenko, F; Johnsen, S (2016) *Women and Girls Facing Severe and Multiple Disadvantage: Interim Report*. Lankelly Chase Foundation

3. McNeish, D and Scott, S (2014) *Women and Girls at Risk: Evidence Across the Life Course*. Lankelly Chase Foundation

Organisational aims

The *Supporting Sisters* project enabled us to make significant changes within our staff team, through the development of existing roles as well as the recruitment of new members of the team. These changes contributed to reaching the wider organisational aims of the project: **raising the profile of the organisation, strengthening partnerships, sharing good practice and improving evidencing.** The expansion of the staff team brought specialist knowledge, skills and focus to new areas of organisational work, supporting the project at a strategic level as well as increasing capacity in direct delivery and service management.

Raising our profile

Having a dedicated Media, Marketing and Communications officer has enabled us to develop a strong presence online; more frequent, responsive posting with consistent messaging creates a coherent sense of the organisation across all our platforms. Our Comms Officer has generated new social media profiles, enabling us to not only reach more women who may need support, but also develop our professional networks. There has been growth across all platforms in followers, reach and engagement, meaning our social media content is reaching a wider audience and is generating more activity. Our Comms officer has also developed the branding of the organisation. We have been able to raise our profile through connecting to partner organisations, generating external publicity and presence for Aspire. Thanks to our Comms Officer, we were awarded a place on the Media Trust's Headlining Mental Health Programme (April-September 2021), which offered extensive marketing support and communications training, as well as funding to support the development of a new website. We could not have predicated just how valuable the work of our Communications Officer in strengthening our online presence would be before the pandemic. During Lockdown, we were able to nurture and sustain a sense of community for women through social media. In particular, our Facebook page took on a new significance, enabling women to stay connected with the Centre and with each other.

Strengthening partnerships

In order to support the development of a sustainable future for Aspire beyond the Women and Girls Initiative funding, we recruited a Partnership Development Worker. Although the pandemic significantly limited the scope of this role, our Partnership Development Worker has been able to develop relationships with external agencies and contribute to sustainability planning and funding applications. She also connected with local Social Prescribing initiatives, increasing our referrals from this source. The Partnership Development Worker has strengthened Aspire's presence within local forums across key agendas, and has organised partnership events with other women's organisations, such as an online International Women's Day celebration.



Improving internal systems, data collection and evidencing

The recruitment of a Data, Evaluation and Social Impact Lead in the 3rd year of the *Supporting Sisters* project has enabled us to improve quantitative data collection systems across the organisation, strengthening our evidence base and improving the quality and reliability of our data. The introduction of a new database has made data collection more consistent across all our services, centralising information to improve reporting, standardise systems and support direct delivery. Qualitative data collection and analysis was also improved: our Data, Evaluation and Social Impact Lead delivered the *Sister Stories* project, generating valuable insights from focus groups, evaluation activities and reflective workshops, as well as 1:1 interviews. Our Data, Evaluation and Social Impact Lead has also been able to work closely with our Volunteer Coordinator/Support Services Manager to support service development at a strategic level, and support reflection and evaluation across the staff team.

Increasing capacity

During the pandemic, it became critical to increase capacity to support direct delivery of our services. One of our long-standing volunteers successfully applied for the new Support Worker role, and has been in post since September 2020. This role has been vital in the transition back to face-to-face services in Centre, and our Support Worker has also provided essential support to ensure online services continue to run. Within the Support Worker role, we have also developed a new initial contact system, enabling us to ensure a person-centred approach from point of referral. Our Support Worker is able to triage referrals into Aspire services, so that women are directed to the most appropriate support, or signposted to external organisations if necessary. This has improved data collection at point of referral, and has also enabled us to get a clear understanding of women's presenting needs in order to provide as responsive a service as possible. This role has also increased capacity for our Volunteer Coordinator/Support Services Manager to continue to develop our services alongside our Supporting Sisters. We are committed to ensuring this role can develop sustainably as it provides vital support to peer-led delivery and enables us to be responsive and consistent from the moment women make contact with the Centre.



AMY'S STORY

In March 2020, when the Coronavirus pandemic forced Aspire to close, Amy found herself isolated and frightened, triggering traumatic experiences from more than a decade ago. In her 30's, Amy suffered a prolonged episode of drug-induced psychosis and acute anxiety, leaving her more or less housebound for over a year. The Coronavirus lockdown took Amy back to that period of her life, and her mental health began to deteriorate.

When Amy first came to Aspire, she was recovering from substance addiction. Despite having turned her life around, Amy felt that the stigma of previously being a drug-user continued to impact on her ability to find work, build a community and regain her sense of self-worth. At Aspire, however, Amy felt accepted, and felt that staff and women using the services recognised her positive qualities, rather than defining her by the difficulties of her past.

“I knew that was a safe place for me to be. No one ever judges you there. I was suicidal, and so low at that point and I thought everyone just looks at me and sees a drug-addict. And you still get slated and people always put you down. Whereas, Aspire's the first place I went to where they build you up to be the best you.”

Before the pandemic, Amy was coming to Aspire most days of the week, taking courses or volunteering. Amy still struggles with periods of severe anxiety and depression, but this regular contact with the Centre enabled Amy to manage her mental health more effectively. Amy took personal development courses at Aspire, alongside skills-based and educational classes. As her confidence grew, she decided to do the *Supporting Sisters* volunteer training. Amy trained as a peer mentor, and supported other women coming to the centre for the first time. She also volunteered at Lanchester Road hospital as part of Aspire's work providing wellbeing services to inpatients and supporting women to access Aspire services in the community after discharge. Mentored by the Volunteer Coordinator, Amy was encouraged to see her strengths, skills, and potential. In 2018, Amy was awarded an Unsung Hero award at the Durham County Council Learner Awards, in recognition of her volunteering work at Aspire.

“[Aspire gave me] confidence, self-esteem, belief in myself. It made me feel like I am worth it: I am worth the space on this earth. Because that’s how I felt, as though I was nothing. And Aspire teaches you that you’re not nothing. Like, everyone has good qualities. So that made me value myself.”

During Lockdown, Amy was able to reconnect with her peers through the Aspire online support groups. Although online provision was not the same as being in the Centre, for Amy this was still an important way for her to re-establish her support networks and social connections, and find solidarity with other women in the confusion and isolation of the pandemic. As soon as it was possible to do so, Amy began volunteering as a Supporting Sister again, delivering Aspire wellbeing packs to provide practical support to women during lockdown. This not only provided invaluable support to women in the community, but also helped Amy to stay active and well during the pandemic.

“To be a Supporting Sister, you feel part of, like, a family. I wouldn’t even say ‘group’, because that doesn’t do it justice. It’s a family. You feel part of this... And you’re all there, helping each other. It means everything to me, because that’s who I am now. I wouldn’t be me, sitting here now, if it wasn’t for Aspire. That’s who I am.”



Sugarcraft flowers made by women during our Evaluation and Reflection Day

THE WOMEN'S WELLNESS SERVICE

229

women have used the
Wellness Service since
the launch of the
project

1949

appointments have
been offered through
the service since the
launch of the project

The Women's Wellness Service strengthens the holistic offer of the *Supporting Sisters* programme, providing a range of treatments and clinics to promote physical health, wellbeing, and self-care. All of the services are delivered by qualified practitioners and healthcare professionals and are free-of-charge. Since the project began, the Women's Wellness Service has included complementary therapies, hand and body massage, manicure appointments, general health "MOT's" and a regular podiatry clinic.

During the pandemic, all our clinics were suspended in line with government guidance. Since the reintroduction of massage and podiatry clinics in the Centre in 2021, 53 women have accessed treatments through the Women's Wellness Service.

Accessibility

Almost half (44%) of women attending Wellness Service appointments had not accessed similar services previously. Women may face multiple barriers to accessing mainstream health and wellbeing services, including practical barriers (such as finances), and psychological barriers such as low self-esteem, anxiety or trauma. Women told us that the cost of massage treatments and private clinics elsewhere was a deterrent or barrier to accessing these types of 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-of-charge. Embedding the Women's Wellness Service within Aspire's holistic support services enables women to access treatments in a safe environment that they know and trust. As Edie's story (p.15) demonstrates, the sense of safety provided by the centre allows women to access vital health and wellbeing services to address physical health issues that may otherwise go untreated. The Wellness Service also makes complementary therapies accessible to women, providing holistic treatments and massage to improve wellbeing and promote self-care. The non-judgemental, gender-specific environment of the centre helps to make these services more accessible.

“People feel really confident here, I think, coming in, because it's just women-only, and it's not a salon environment. It's not the thing where – oh I've got to go in there, you know, I've got to, I don't know, look a certain way, dress a certain way. There's none of that here. You're accepted as you are when you come in.”
– Wellness Service practitioner

Outcomes

Data based on 165 responses to Wellness Service feedback forms completed between September 2016 - May 2018

100% of women using the Wellness Service found their treatment **BENEFICIAL** and had a **POSITIVE** experience of the service overall

81% of women felt their treatment had benefitted their **PHYSICAL HEALTH**

66% of women felt their treatment had benefitted their **MENTAL HEALTH**

45% of women felt their treatment had benefitted their **EMOTIONAL WELLBEING**



EDIE'S STORY

Eddie struggles with her mental health, and her anxiety can make it difficult for her to make and keep appointments to maintain her self-care. Eddie also has multiple debilitating physical health conditions, including Fibromyalgia and Type 2 diabetes. She had been struggling for some time with cracked heels, causing her increasing pain and discomfort, and impacting on her confidence. Eddie's extensive difficulties with her mental and physical health meant that she understandably struggled to prioritise this issue. Despite prompts from her doctor that she needed to address this, Eddie did not want to accept a referral to a podiatrist. Her high anxiety around physical contact, as well as the discomfort she felt around others seeing her feet meant that Eddie did not want to risk paying for an appointment she may not be able to continue with. Eddie had been coming to Aspire on and off for years, and had several friends who had accessed podiatry through our Women's Wellness Service. This gave Eddie the confidence to make an appointment:

“Because other people I know had been, it made [the Aspire podiatrist] a safe person to go and see.”

Eddie says she felt really at ease during the appointment. Our podiatrist was led by Eddie throughout, allowing her to manage her anxiety and progress with the treatment at her own pace. As well as alleviating the immediate discomfort Eddie was experiencing, our podiatry service also offered Eddie advice and guidance around how to maintain self-care around her cracked heels between appointments. Eddie was able to develop a routine with at-home treatment so that her condition would not worsen.

“The minute I've had an appointment [the podiatrist] makes another one. I put it in my diary. So I know it's there, I know it's coming, I know I've got to do the bits in-between... It's the motivation to keep going, to keep looking after myself.”

Accessing the podiatry service at Aspire has enabled Eddie to manage her cracked heels and maintain healthy toenails. This has meant she feels confident to wear sandals in the hot weather, and has boosted her general self-esteem. Without this unique, free service, Eddie would not have accessed podiatry treatments and her condition would likely have worsened, further impacting on both her mental and physical health.

“It's just made such a huge difference to me, and she's given me a confidence I didn't have.”

Impact

The majority of women using the Wellness Service are seeking treatment for specific health concerns, presenting with a wide range of issues including injuries, back pain, joint and muscular issues, headaches and sinus problems. Many Wellness Service clients have long-term conditions, and pain relief is a central motivation for women seeking support through our clinics. Wellness Service practitioners report that many of the women they treat are on prescribed pain relief from the GP, but the root cause of the issue has not been addressed. Postural, muscular and joint-related issues can be treated through the Wellness Service, where our practitioners are able to take the time with clients to assess the cause and work with women to address it.

Women attending Aspire also report that they have sought advice from the Wellness Service before presenting at the GP. Where conditions need medical intervention, women are encouraged and supported to seek further treatment. Many women report that they were more likely to make an appointment with a Primary Care service on advice from one of our Wellness Service practitioners. Regular, accessible holistic therapies can also be preventative, ensuring issues do not develop or worsen. Women also report positive wellbeing outcomes from treatments such as

massage and reflexology, including relaxation and increased energy. Focus group participants reflected on the significant role the Wellness Service played in supporting them to be more mindful of their own self-care, to be more engaged with their bodies and more able to seek help or advice. Having treatments through the Wellness Service creates space for women to focus on themselves, and this has a significant impact on women's sense of self, and self-worth:

“It’s giving yourself permission, you know? I’m allowed to have this time for me.”

Aspire's unique holistic provision validates and centralises women's needs. This ethos challenges the notion that self-care is indulgent, and provides a space for women to prioritise their own wellbeing:

“Yes, in some ways it is a luxury, but it is also a necessity.”

For many women, the Wellness Service provided rare opportunities for physical human contact in a safe environment. Focus group participants reflected on the deeply reparative effect of human touch through Wellness Service treatments. This contact made women feel “seen” and cared for, alleviating the sense of alienation caused by isolation, bereavement, mental health struggles or trauma. For many women, such as Edie, physical contact can also be a barrier for accessing treatments, which is why a trauma-informed approach in this service is essential.

COPRODUCTION & VOLUNTEERING

At the heart of the *Supporting Sisters* project is the volunteering programme, which equips women to take on a wide range of roles, including direct delivery of our peer-led support services. The volunteer training programme is also a central tenet of co-production throughout the organisation, as it empowers women to actively engage with the design, delivery and evaluation of all our services.

While Aspire was founded on a collaborative, coproduced model, the *Supporting Sisters* project has enabled us to develop and strengthen the structures that support women to participate in all aspects of service design and delivery:

- Peer-led service provision
- Individual and group supervision for direct delivery roles
- Regular volunteer meetings across all roles
- Working groups in specific areas of interest/expertise
- Opportunities to co-develop and deliver training
- Focus groups
- Opportunities to represent Aspire at external events and within local forums
- Opportunities to support tutors within the Learning programme

“For me, [the most rewarding thing about volunteering] is watching how the services have grown. I’m not personally responsible for that, but as a team we all are, because it’s such a collaborative approach.”

The *Supporting Sisters* volunteer programme empowers women to develop confidence, skills and resilience, fostering an environment where women feel capable of being pro-active, engaged and self-organised. The project has been designed to enable women to bring a rich variety of skills and lived experience to provide women-centred services, inform decision-making and effect positive change. Volunteering roles include:

- Listener
- Group facilitator
- Befriender
- Peer mentor
- Administration support
- Fundraising and events
- Aspire Ambassador

“[At Aspire] you're really valued for what you do. That means a lot to me, to be valued for what I do. And I know I'm putting something back: this place has built me back up again, so this is where I want to give my time to.”

44

women have completed
the *Supporting Sisters*
core training

Training

All volunteers within the project complete the core *Supporting Sisters* training programme, in order to ensure that the ethos and values of Aspire are consistently reinforced across all aspects of work within the organisation. The *Supporting Sisters* project has enabled us to develop an extensive, robust training programme for all our volunteers, supporting women to challenge themselves and reach their potential. Wider training is available to further develop volunteers' skills and knowledge in specific areas of interest such as:

- Domestic Violence and Abuse
- Clare's Law
- Eating Distress
- Mental Health First Aid
- Suicide Prevention and Self-Harm
- Gambling Awareness
- Emotional Resilience

Through the volunteer programme, we have also been able to provide additional training and awareness-raising on specific issues for women not involved directly in volunteering. The core training is centrally concerned with personal development and reflection, enabling women to recognise their own strengths and develop confidence and self-belief, regardless of which roles they take on within the organisation. We were also able to successfully deliver our volunteer training in a blended modality through the Coronavirus pandemic. Data from volunteer Listener and Group facilitator questionnaires was overwhelmingly positive, with 100% of respondents either agreeing or strongly agreeing that they felt confident, well-equipped and well supported in their roles.

“[The Supporting Sisters training] was the most intense, complex and perfect bundle of education I have ever experienced.”

In 2018, Aspire was awarded the County Durham Kite Mark Award in recognition of the high-quality training and support for volunteers within the *Supporting Sisters* programme. In 2019, our Volunteer Coordinator won the Inspirational Tutor Award at the Durham County Council Festival of Learning, in recognition of her work delivering Aspire's core volunteer training.



LAURIE'S STORY

Laurie had struggled with her mental health for many years, and was signposted to Aspire by her therapist at Talking Changes. Coming to the centre for the first time was a huge step for Laurie, but she was determined to find ways to help her manage the debilitating effects of anxiety, depression and PTSD. Laurie decided to concentrate on training and learning opportunities at Aspire, to give her structure and focus. In January 2019, Laurie 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, Laurie's confidence grew.

Laurie brought 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. Passionate about Psychology and Criminology, Laurie also supported tutors delivering classes in centre. Throughout the pandemic, Laurie rose to and embraced the challenges of working online in order to continue to support other women, facilitating our Monday Social group. Laurie found that the smaller, more intimate online session enabled her to develop her skills even further. In 2020, Laurie was awarded Volunteer of the Year at the Durham County Council Learner Awards:

“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.”

Volunteering with Aspire and taking courses in a range of subjects gave Laurie the confidence to start to pursue her ambitions. In 2021, Laurie passed her Level 2 Cache Certificate in Counselling, and has now left her volunteering role to go on to further studies in this area.

“I have loved my time at Aspire, especially learning new skills which has been crucial to my development. The support I have received from tutors and the Volunteer Co-ordinator has been invaluable.”

Outcomes

One of our 5 core objectives of the *Supporting Sisters* programme was that women would gain marketable skills through their involvement with volunteering at Aspire. The range of volunteer roles within the programme enables women to develop diverse transferable skills; some women (see Sadie's story, p.37) go on to directly use the 'marketable' skills gained from volunteering to secure paid employment. Others, like Laurie (p.19), use their volunteering experience as a foundation for further study.

While it is clear that the *Supporting Sisters* volunteering programme does provide women with a wide range of marketable skills, it is also evident that volunteering can impact profoundly on women's lives, beyond progression towards employment. Qualitative data from our Sister Stories reflects national evidence that volunteering can have significant positive outcomes for wellbeing, through the pathways of self-efficacy, social connectedness and a sense of purpose⁴. Volunteering supports mental health and wellbeing, as well as strengthening women's social and support networks. Feeling appreciated and doing something purposeful and meaningful are key mechanisms of change for wellbeing outcomes from volunteering⁵.

“[As a Supporting Sister] I felt like I did have something to offer. Whereas most of my life I've always felt like I didn't have anything at all, to offer anybody, that was worth anything, you know what I mean? But yeah, it gave us a lot of confidence.”

Through the *Supporting Sisters* programme, our dedicated Volunteer Coordinator is able to identify and nurture women's strengths, skills and lived experience. Women engaged in volunteering identified their relationship with the Volunteer Coordinator as a key factor supporting their personal development and self-belief. While volunteers like Sadie (p.37) are able to use the skills gained through volunteering to secure paid employment, her story also shows that Aspire was crucial in enabling her to come to point where she believed this was even possible:

“I was too scared to even attempt to get a job, I really was. Petrified. Any sort of, oh, I don't know, judgement of other people. I always felt like I wasn't good enough, and I couldn't do that, no way could I do that. And it took going to Aspire for me to understand. And it took a long time, it didn't just happen in a year. It took years, but it finally happened.”

Without the confidence, community and sense of self-efficacy that women gain from becoming a Supporting Sister volunteer, they would not be able to mobilise marketable skills and experience. Similarly, Billie's story (p.21) illustrates the significant impact of the *Supporting Sisters* volunteer training on women's lives, regardless of whether they take on active delivery roles in the centre.



BILLIE'S STORY

“I was born in darkness. I was born around all this bad stuff, and what happened at Aspire helped me to understand and say no, this is wrong. And you can get out of that situation. You can.”

Billie endured extensive physical, psychological and sexual abuse throughout her childhood. At 17, Billie was trafficked to the UK, where she spent the next 15 years homeless, with no recourse to public funds, battling addictions and escorting to survive. Billie describes her past as “just, trauma after trauma”, and her experiences of abuse and exploitation made her incredibly wary of connecting with other people. When Billie was relocated the North East for her own safety with her new-born daughter, she was struggling with her mental health and very isolated. She didn't know anybody in the area and her only contact was with her Health Visitor and Social Worker. As a first-time mother, she felt overwhelmed and unsure as to what the future held for her and her daughter:

“I was really, really in a very dark place. The only thing that was keeping me going was my child, basically. Thinking what's going to happen now? What happens from here?”

The on-site creche meant that Billie could leave her daughter in safe hands while she did courses and training at Aspire, something she had not thought possible. She was also able to meet other mothers, and began to feel like she was building a community around her and her daughter. In the safe environment of Aspire, Billie started to open up and make connections with other women at the centre and the staff. This was a powerful force for Billie, giving her a sense of purpose, direction and hope:

“I never had a sense of community. I never felt that I fitted in. I didn't know who I was. But with Aspire, I have an identity. I know who I am... I did have a bad start, but I'm determined to have a good finish. [Aspire] gave me that purpose: I've found my identity. I belong.”

While at the centre, Billie took every opportunity she could, doing courses and training across a wide range of subjects. Having studied Maths and English at Aspire, Billie was able to enrol in college to complete her studies. Beyond the academic qualifications she gained, Billie also learnt vital skills through personal development courses and particularly the Supporting Sisters volunteer training programme.

Billie learnt how to maintain healthy boundaries, assert her needs and give herself space to focus on her own self-care. She put these skills into practice not only in centre, supporting other women, but also in her life outside of Aspire. This was hugely significant for Billie, as she gained a feeling of agency and control in her own life, and a sense of self-worth:

“You might be ok when you’re in Aspire, but you’re still going back to the outside world. You’re still going back to that big jungle, and you’re still going back to everything you face. So, me learning all those skills, and how to actually cope with the outside world, was really life-changing. I was able to enforce everything I learnt in my private life: with friends, with family, with relationships... I was able to stand up to people, and not get walked over. I was able to say no. I found my strength. I found my voice.”

The significant and enduring trauma of Billie’s life experiences have meant she continues to struggle with mental health difficulties, and while attending Aspire she experienced periods of severe depression. When Billie felt unable to come to the centre for weeks at a time, staff would actively reach out to her to offer ongoing support through signposting and practical support, as well as encouraging Billie to come back to the centre herself. The sustained efforts of staff to keep Billie engaged with support enabled her to feel she could continue to come back to the centre:

“So many times, I have been so, so sad and I said I don’t know whether I’m going to make it today... But it’s knowing where I can always go when I feel like that... It doesn’t matter how many times you mess up; the door will always be open.”

The insecurity of Billie’s immigration status affected her access to services and support in the community, and also had a significant impact on her mental health. Aspire supported Billie throughout the immigration process, providing practical support and advocacy, liaising with Billie’s solicitor and supporting her to manage and attend appointments. Aspire also offered Billie a safe place to open up about her experiences and find ongoing emotional support throughout this punishing and intensely challenging process. Staff at Aspire had little experience of supporting women through the immigration system, and Billie recognises that this was a learning curve for the organisation as well as for her personally. In 2020, Billie was granted Leave to Remain and is now able to focus on building a secure future for herself and her daughter.

“In Aspire, I have a home. I have sisters. I have mothers. A place that I can call home... My life is changing, and part of me feels like I want to go back, but I’m thinking: it will always be your home, but you’re growing! Embrace it!”

The ongoing work of maintaining her mental health, healing from her past, and managing her doubts and fears about the future continues for Billie. However, she is now thriving in the community with a powerful sense of purpose: teaching skills classes, supporting other vulnerable people, studying at college, and exploring paid work. Although Billie comes back to Aspire when she can, or when she needs to, to say hello or to see some friendly faces, she no longer attends the centre regularly. Her life has changed significantly since she first came through the doors at Aspire, and she is finding her own way, moving forwards with the resilience and determination she found within the community of women at Aspire:

“I’m at my happiest in my life. I carry the Aspire energy everywhere I go, I carry it. But I’m dreaming! Aspire’s made me dream big. You know what? You can do it.”

Peer Support

Peer-to-peer support enables women to progress and develop in their volunteering roles, and is embedded into the *Supporting Sisters* programme. Newly trained volunteers work alongside more experienced women in group support roles, developing experience and skills in practice before taking the lead on facilitation when they are ready. Listeners have monthly 'Peer Practical' sessions to practice skills and support one another with the emotional impact of direct work. Peer-mentoring is a strengths-based model that promotes independence and also helps cultivate a sense of community. Volunteers are also encouraged to engage with refresher training, which supports skills development as well as nurturing the strong community of Aspire volunteers, as new recruits and more experienced volunteers train alongside one another. Women are able to benefit from the diverse skills, knowledge and experience of their peers.

“That’s one of the great things about Aspire, especially with the volunteer group: it’s such a good spread of experience, lived experience, as well as what we learn. Because our training is phenomenal, really.”

VOLUNTEERING IN A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

The Coronavirus pandemic inevitably impacted on volunteer experience and capacity, testing resilience and creating practical and psychological challenges for our Supporting Sisters. All of our volunteers were affected in different ways: struggling with mental health, increased caring responsibilities, bereavement and isolation. For many of us, the pandemic forced us to reprioritize our energies, efforts and aspirations. As a result, several volunteers left their roles at Aspire permanently during this period, and all of our remaining volunteers had altered capacity for delivering support to others.

For many of our volunteers, such as Sadie (p.37) and Amy (p.11), the Aspire Centre becomes a foundation, helping women to build structure in their lives, find purpose and fulfilment, form community and sense of self. The closure of the Aspire building during the pandemic therefore had a significant impact on our volunteers. The loss of the physical space of the Centre was destabilising, isolating, and disorienting:

“It was a bit like having the rug pulled from under you to be honest, because, you know, you go there [to Aspire] all the time and then, all of a sudden, you can’t.”

“I just felt totally lost and like I’d been cast adrift and, you know, just missing that input and you know, being in touch with all of [the volunteers] and you know, delivering a service to the women in the drop-ins and whatever. It, it was horrible.”

However, the community of Supporting Sisters was also a source of strength for many of our volunteers. When the Centre was forced to close, we did not have adequate systems to transition immediately into remote working or online provision. Our Volunteer Coordinator maintained contact with volunteers individually in the interim period before regular online meetings and group chat platforms were established.

“[When I was added to the group chat] I just felt elated because, you know, [the other volunteers] were back there again in my life and, it just felt great to know that I wasn’t the only one that was having the same thoughts and feelings and insecurities. So, it was a big help.”

Regular remote contact and group communication was vital in order for our volunteers to stay connected, feel supported and share information. Staying connected to Aspire supported women to maintain routine and a sense of purpose during the pandemic, fostering a powerful community of peer support.

Volunteers felt they burnt out more quickly working remotely, as a result of the wider impact of the pandemic on their personal lives, as well as the strains of working online. As well as increasing opportunities for peer-led support and supervision, it was also essential to ensure that the development of alternative provision was paced appropriately. Throughout the pandemic, we were led by our Supporting Sister volunteers in relation to how we designed and delivered remote support. Volunteers played a central role in shaping our online services, feeding back on their experiences and responding to women's needs as we tested remote provision. Supporting women online required our volunteers to adapt their wealth of knowledge and skills to new

platforms, technologies and ways of working. Our Supporting Sisters were able to identify training needs, and were committed to developing their skills, taking every opportunity and rising to the significant challenges of volunteer through the pandemic:

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

Through weekly online meetings, and a facilitated focus group, volunteers reflected on their experiences of online delivery and collated feedback from the women they were supporting, enabling us to provide responsive, needs-led support throughout this period.

Recruitment

During the pandemic, we successfully recruited and trained a new cohort of *Supporting Sisters* volunteers. We adapted our approach so that the core training could be delivered in a blended modality, both online and in person. Retention from this cohort of volunteers was very successful: while 1 woman was unable to complete the course, 6 women are now in direct delivery roles within our support services. Women who had been accessing services in the Centre as well as women new to *Aspire* were able to engage with volunteer training during the pandemic. The pandemic had impacted on all of the women recruited, but the main reasons for wanting to volunteer remained largely unchanged from previous cohorts; women sought structure and purpose from volunteering, and were motivated by a desire to gain confidence and self-worth through using their own lived experiences to "give something back" to their community.

While training online presented challenges, particularly in terms of skills practice and being able to get to know one another remotely, volunteers told us that online sessions also gave them structure, focus and purpose during the pandemic, supporting their personal wellbeing. The use of reflective journals is a core component of the *Supporting Sisters* volunteer training, and women completing the course during the pandemic found journal reflection particularly helpful, as it enabled them to stay connected to the process despite working remotely.

Peer-led activities:

THE LISTENING SERVICE

Our confidential Listening Service provides 1:1, peer-led support to women. The Listening Service has always been delivered by our *Supporting Sisters* volunteers, and is available for women to access face-to-face or via telephone. The Listening Service is designed to be flexible and responsive to the needs of individual women; there is no maximum number of sessions imposed and women can choose to take a step back or return to the service at any time, accessing short-term and longer-term support as needed.

As a peer-led service, the Listening Service relies on dedicated volunteers to provide emotional support, information and guidance, and signposting to women who need 1:1 support.

"[Delivering] the Listening Service is hugely rewarding. Because you can just, it's just the process isn't it, it's not about the individual, who is listening, it's the process that works... At the end of the day, it's just the fact that someone is sitting listening to you, can just make them feel so much better, generally."

- Listener



73

women have accessed 1:1 support through the Listening Service

861

appointments have been offered through the service

18

women accessed remote Listening Service support during the pandemic

Duration of support: Listening Service clients 2016-2019



Figure 2: Based on 54 women

Duration of support: Listening Service clients 2019-2021

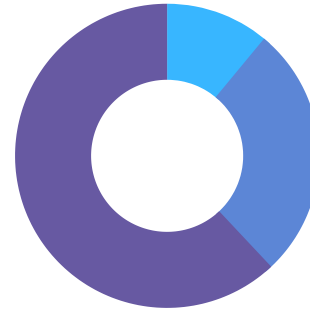


Figure 3: Based on 29 women

Duration of support

In the first 3 years of the project (Figure 2), women were predominantly using the Listening Service on a 1-off/drop-in basis (42%), or accessing short-term 1:1 support (up to 6 sessions; 32%). Feedback from clients using the service during the first 3 years indicates that 94% had a positive overall experience and found their initial Listening Service appointment beneficial (data based on 31 client feedback forms). This suggests that the high rates of 1-off/drop-in appointments were not due to dissatisfaction with the service. During the final 2 years of the project (Figure 3), we can see a significant shift in the ways in which women engaged with the Listening Service. During years 4 and 5 of the *Supporting Sisters* programme, there was a notable increase in women accessing longer-term support (62% more than 6 appointments), and a significant decrease in 1-off/drop-in appointments. There are several factors potentially contributing to this shift:

- **The introduction of Check-in and Chat:** of the 94 women who were supported through our telephone befriending service, 68% accessed ad hoc support. The Check-in and Chat service may be providing support to women who would have previously accessed a 1-off Listening Service.
- **Initial contact:** Since the development of our first Support Worker role, an initial contact system has been developed to strengthen our referral processes and provide person-centred first contact to women who are new to Aspire. This system enables more appropriate referrals into specific support pathways, and therefore may account for fewer women accessing 1-off Listening Service appointments.
- **The pandemic:** The impact of the Coronavirus pandemic may mean that more women need consistent, longer-term 1:1 emotional support

While the Listening Service is not a counselling, psychotherapeutic or psychological intervention, it can offer women responsive, consistent support. Data on support duration from the Listening Service demonstrates the demand for this flexible, needs-led 1:1 service that can support women longer-term. This is also valuable data to help tailor volunteer training to suit delivery needs.

Listening Service: appointments provided

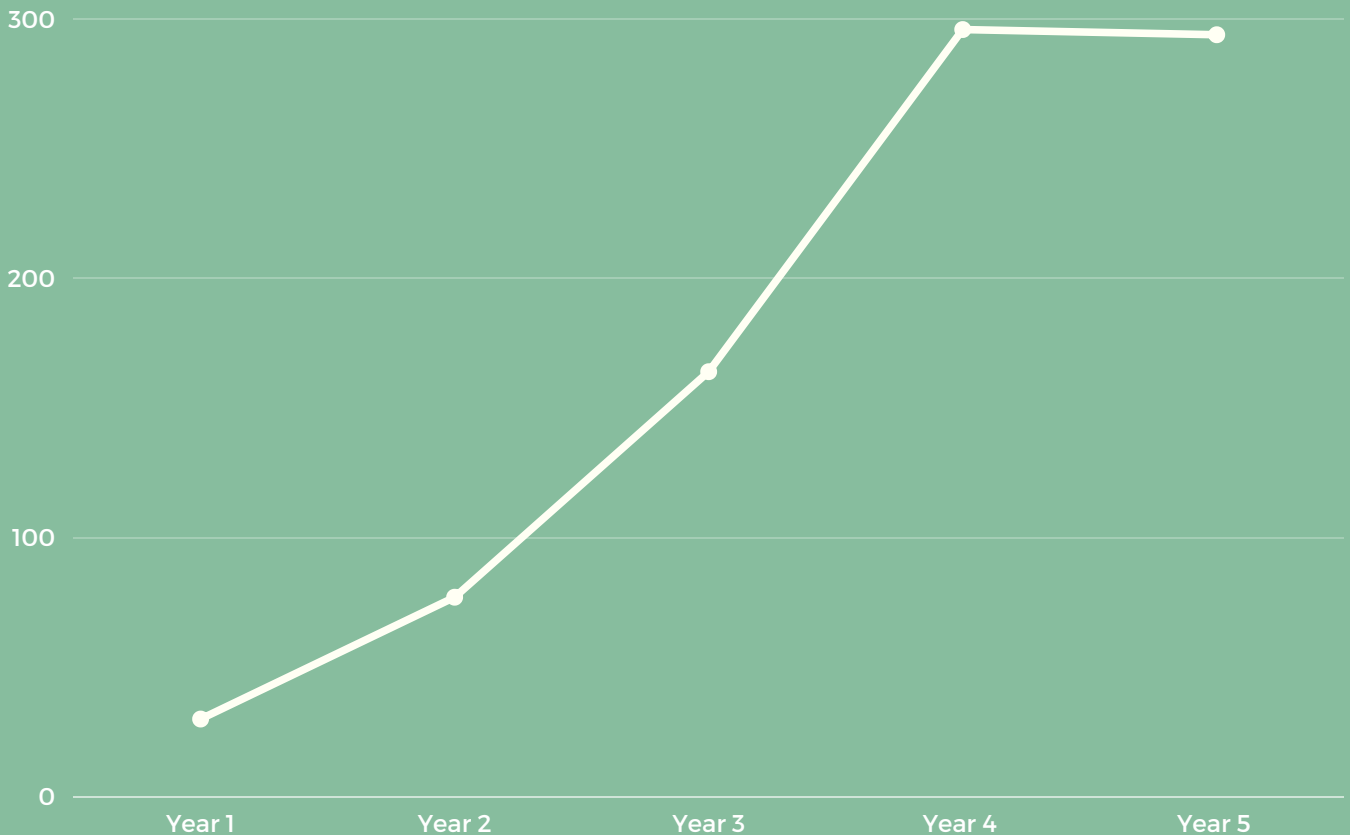


Figure 4.

Service demand

The demand for the Listening Service has continued to increase significantly over the course of the project (see Figure 4). Despite the service being suspended for several weeks when the centre first closed due to the pandemic, there was not a significant decrease in appointments offered from the 4th to the final year of the project.

However, during the 5th year, the number of women accessing this service was 40% lower than in the previous year; as this decrease is not reflected in the number of appointments provided during the final year of the project, this suggests that while fewer women were accessing the service, women who were engaged with 1:1 support required more frequent support.

The Coronavirus pandemic had a significant impact on volunteer capacity. Several of our Supporting Sisters needed

to leave their volunteer roles during this period, and many that remained engaged in direct delivery had reduced capacity. Increased caring responsibilities, lack of privacy, and the emotional toll of the pandemic on our volunteers all had an impact. The increase in the need for longer-term support also affects capacity. Prior to the Coronavirus pandemic, we were able to offer every woman referred into the Listening Service an appointment within 7 days. In March 2021, a waiting list was introduced into the Listening Service for the first time since the project launch. Based on current capacity, women may be waiting up to six months for a Listening Service appointment. It is vital therefore that we continue to actively recruit new volunteers, in order to increase capacity and reduce waiting times for 1:1 support. It may also be necessary to consider introducing limits on long-term support, if waiting list times continue to increase due to lack of capacity from long-term service dependency.

Outcomes

Following the interim review, new evaluation systems were introduced into the Listening Service. The Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale was introduced, along with feedback at regular review periods. However, the return on these tools was poor. In practice, volunteers felt that the scales impacted on their relationship with the women they were supporting, and many Listeners found it difficult and disruptive to introduce this tool in sessions, particularly during the pandemic. The flexibility of the service also presents challenges for developing standardised processes to evaluate incremental change. In the final year of the project, feedback forms were sent out to all Listening Service clients who had been supported since September 2019. Of the 29 women who were invited to give feedback, 13 responded:

CONNECTION

92% of women felt that the Listening Service had helped them to **feel less alone**

SELF-ESTEEM

92% of women felt that the Listening Service had helped them to **value themselves and their own self-care**

CONFIDENCE

75% of women felt that the Listening Service had helped them to **feel more confident in themselves**

RESILIENCE

85% of women felt that the Listening Service had helped them to **cope with things they had been struggling with**

"[My Listener] was a great help and just knowing Aspire is there is a great comfort"

"I am so thankful that I contacted Aspire. The Listening service helped me to deal with the struggles I was facing at every stage. I would not be in the positive situation I am in now without the Listening Service. I am now out of my abusive relationship, have my own house and have my life back. My confidence is growing and I am looking forward to moving on and contributing to society. I cannot thank Aspire enough."

"[The Listening Service was] excellent - it saved my life. I was really rock-bottom when my friend made arrangements for me to access the service. I can never thank Aspire and [my Listener] enough for all the support I received."

"The Listening service played a great part in my life, so valuable to my needs. At the time my family was in a great deal of need of my help, I was pulled, pushed, worried, needing someone valuable to my health and needs to get me through this time. This service was tremendously helpful. Having a time to talk to help me feel better also giving myself HOPE. Otherwise I don't know what I would have felt achieving all I did."

"The service helped me greatly in becoming more confident again. [My listener] was very friendly and put me at ease to be able to talk about my problems. I do not know how I would be now if it wasn't for Aspire."

Peer-led activities:

CHECK-IN AND CHAT

94

women have accessed remote 1:1 outreach support or befriending through Check-in and Chat

Check-in and chat service uptake

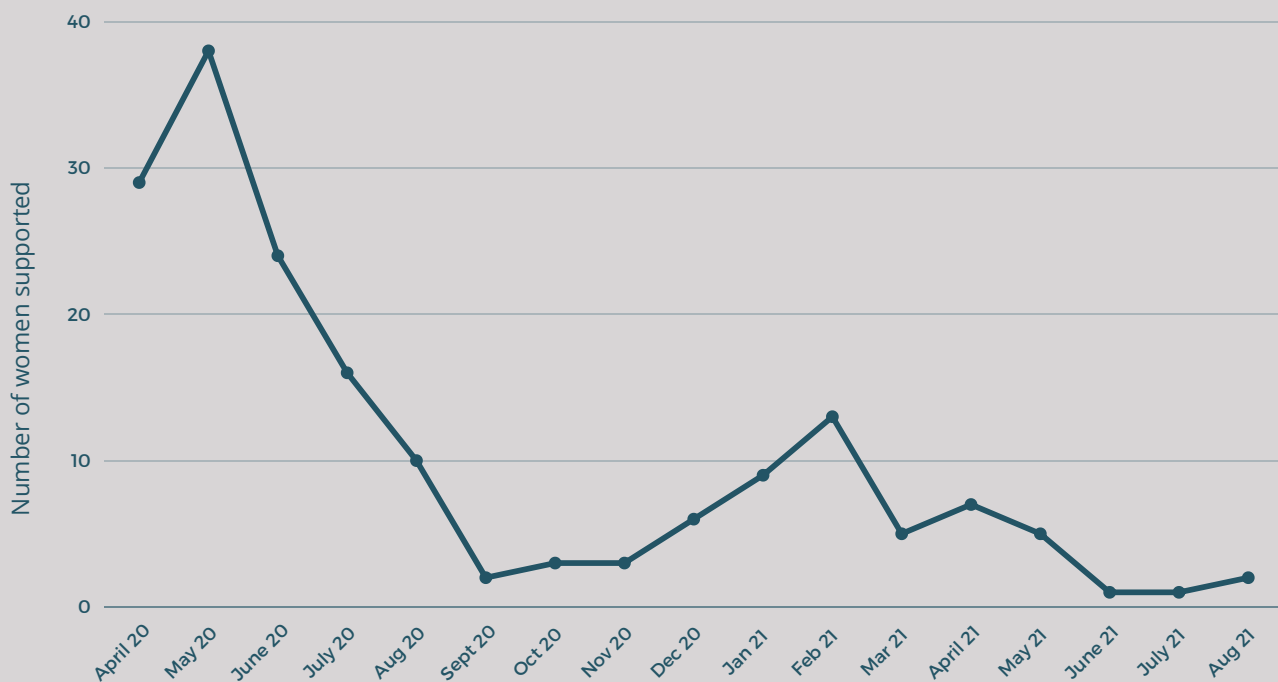


Figure 4.

When the Centre was forced to close its doors in the first Lockdown of the Coronavirus pandemic, all support services were suspended. Check-in and Chat was launched in April 2020, providing telephone befriending alongside an assertive outreach and incoming call service. The incoming service was staffed during specific hours, to enable women to seek support remotely. The assertive outreach service enabled us to re-establish contact with women who had been actively attending the Centre before the closure; this service provided vital reconnection for women who had been reliant on in-centre support. Our *Supporting Sisters* volunteers provided a telephone befriending service through the Check-in and Chat line, offering consistent, person-centred and peer-led support to help reduce the extreme isolation of the Lockdowns. We can see that demand for this service has been in line with periods of increased restrictions during the pandemic (see Figure 4). As we move forwards reintegrating face-to-face provision in Centre, we will continue to monitor the Check-in and Chat service, to determine how best to offer befriending within our support services.



CRECHE

40

women have used the creche in order to access learning, support and wellbeing services

Lack of childcare provision can act as a significant barrier for many women trying to access education, training or support services. Before the *Supporting Sisters* project initiative, the on-site creche facility at Aspire was limited due to funding and resources, meaning that women with young children had fewer opportunities to attend the centre. Since the launch of the project, the creche has been able to operate flexibly in response to need, enabling women to engage with any training, volunteering activities, courses or services offered at Aspire. As well as increasing the accessibility of Aspire services, the creche also offers vital support to women with young children, such as Billie (p.21) helping them to establish a routine, build confidence and connect with other women.

“The creche gives me the chance to take a break for a couple of hours and focus on keeping myself well, knowing my little body is being well looked after.”

On average,

440

hours of creche provision was taken up each year before the pandemic

Peer-led activities:

GROUP SUPPORT

Peer-led group support is a central aspect of our service provision. Prior to the pandemic, 16 hours of group support were being delivered in Centre by trained volunteers each week. A range of groups were established and maintained over the first 3 years of the programme, responding to women's needs as well as harnessing the skills and experience of our volunteers in particular areas of expertise or interest. Prior to the pandemic, *Supporting Sisters* volunteers also developed a summer timetable of "taster" sessions, offering various activities to increase access to the Centre during the school holidays. Volunteers also supported enrolment for the learning programme, attending sessions at the start of term to promote the support services to learners. Several Supporting Sister volunteers also took on roles as Learner Representatives, working across the educational programme to engage learners in the design and delivery of courses.

Aspire support groups aim to improve wellbeing and tackle isolation, providing structured and social forums for women to develop friendships and support networks, as well as gain new skills or engage in new activities.



375

women have attended social and structured group support in the centre

Groups run throughout the year, offering continuity of support for women outside of term-time. For some women, these informal sessions may be their only social contact; having a safe, consistent space to connect helps to cultivate a strong sense of community and belonging. Drop-in sessions increased to twice-weekly to meet demand in the third year of the project, offering a relaxed social space for women alongside our other group activities. Groups included:

- Singing Sisters
- Computer drop-in
- Mature friends
- Chat 'n' Craft
- Positive Progress

For many women, drop-ins and support groups also act as a gateway for them to find out about other services/courses at Aspire, and also offered a route into becoming a volunteer. Between March 2019-March 2020 (period represents most reliable data), 67% of women enrolled on courses within Aspire's Learning programme had accessed support services at point of referral. In the same period, of the women who accessed support services, only 1% were women who had enrolled on Learning courses at point of referral. This indicates that support services are enabling more women to access learning opportunities in the centre, and are providing a vital entry point into all the services we offer.

57

women accessed targeted peer-led support through our All About Drop-ins before the pandemic

Targeted Support

We also facilitate monthly, themed drop-ins around specific areas such as domestic violence and abuse, offering forums for women to share lived experiences, seek support, and increase awareness. The *Supporting Sisters* project enabled us to begin to develop specialist areas of knowledge, skills and expertise within our volunteer team, in order to provide high-quality, targeted support

Domestic Abuse

All of our *Supporting Sisters* volunteers received Domestic Abuse Champion training, alongside our extensive in-house training covering coercive control, abusive relationship dynamics, and legislation to support victims and survivors such as Clare's Law. We also piloted a Domestic Abuse Support Programme in the 3rd year of the project, which 11 women attended.

Finance and Debt

Extensive training was also provided to volunteers concerning finances and debt. We know this is an issue that significantly impacts on women in the community. We developed several partnerships with local and national organisations in order to develop a strong support offer in this area. We partnered with Durham Savers to offer additional training for our volunteers to be able to support women to 'switch and save' by changing their providers. In 2019, we partnered with North East First Credit Union and launched Aspire as a Credit Union Collection Point. Before the pandemic, Supporting Sister volunteers ran a twice-weekly collection point for women using the centre. We also provided awareness raising sessions in collaboration with GamCare to support women affected by gambling addiction.

52

women were saving at Aspire through North East First Credit Union before the pandemic

Outcomes

Women identified 5 key areas of impact from attending drop-ins and support groups. The following statistics are based on 307 feedback forms returned during the first 3 years of the project. Written comments were collated and coded alongside interviews and focus groups from the *Sister Stories* project.

Social Connection

96% of women attending weekly drop-ins reported that their social networks had developed as a result. Across all drop-ins and support groups, the need for social interaction, connection and company was consistently identified by women as a motivation for attending. Women really valued conversation, highlighting the importance of connection with **“like-minded people”**. Making new friends and spending time with other women in a safe, supportive environment were key mechanisms of change for a deeper sense of social connection. Qualitative data from the *Sister Stories* project also supports this, evidencing how the ethos of Aspire enables women to make social connections, share experiences, find solidarity and build community:

“[I came to the group] just to connect with somebody. Because my life’s been quite isolated, and connecting with somebody was the most important thing in my life because I didn’t have anybody, I really didn’t.”

Self-care and Self-esteem

Many women identified support groups as an opportunity to **“have some me time”**, whether this was taking a break from caring roles, or just finding some relief from “day to day worries”. 90% of women attending weekly drop-ins reported an increase in their confidence as a result. Women also acknowledged that their experience of attending Aspire groups left them feeling good about themselves and increased their self-esteem. The positive atmosphere of the Centre and feeling valued within the group were identified as key mechanisms of change for increased self-esteem.

“Aspire gave me belief in myself, which I didn’t have... It was just an overall uplifting experience for me, it was, it really was.”

Mental Health

86% of women attending drop-ins indicated that they struggled with mental health issues, and 96% reported a benefit to their mental health at follow up. Anxiety, social anxiety and depression were frequently disclosed, as well as a range of other mental health conditions. Women reported that the non-judgemental, positive environment of Aspire groups helped them to better manage their moods and mental health. The open-door policy, as well as peer-led provision, were both cited as factors supporting positive engagement with group support, as women felt they could present at Aspire no matter how unwell they felt, and that they would be listened to, accepted, and not judged.

“I know if you’re ever off and you come through those doors, I know the reception I’m going to get so I never feel anxious going [to Aspire]. That’s the place I go for, like, safe time.. Because if you’re ever having a bad day or feeling a bit anxious about something, there’s always somebody to talk to there who’ll really listen.”

Enjoyment

Many women highlighted how much enjoyment they gained from attending the groups, and laughter was a recurring theme. Women reflected a “feel good factor” from attending drop-ins and support groups, often identifying a change in mood following the sessions: “it lifts your spirits”.

“It’s like a little family. It’s a good laugh. It’s good craic in here, it really is!”

A Sense of Purpose

Women described the drop-ins and support groups as key activities in their lives, giving them structure and a sense of purpose, which are vital for wellbeing. Many indicated that attending the groups helped them to keep busy and “get out of the house”. A sense of having “something to look forward to” was also a recurring theme in feedback from group attendees, contributing to general wellbeing and life satisfaction.

“I started having friends and getting to know people in safe spaces and it was a bit of a journey, it was a bit of a journey to, sort of like, try and get myself more settled. But, as time went on, I found more, erm, what’s the word I can use? More direction. And a sense of purpose.”



SADIE'S STORY

Sadie was in an abusive relationship and suffering from severe anxiety and depression when her GP referred her to Aspire. After coming to the drop-in, she started to attend one of Aspire's regular support groups:

“It took me months before I could open my mouth without crying. Things were that bad. I was really a mess. But just going there, every week, I had something to look forward to and to see other people and they would listen to us and it saved my life at the time. I’m not exaggerating, it really did.”

Sadie wasn't sure what to expect from a Women's Centre, having never had close female friends or strong connections with women in her family. But the women-only environment offered Sadie a safe space to begin to recover from her experience of domestic abuse. At Aspire, Sadie found a community of women from all walks of life, and began to feel a sense of belonging that she had been lacking. **“It's the only place in my life where I've felt I've fitted in somewhere. Because I'd never fitted in nowhere.”** The long-term impact of the physical, psychological and financial abuse Sadie suffered from her ex-partner was extensive. Sadie says she had always felt worthless and that she had nothing to offer, that nothing would change for her. **“But, being at Aspire, things did change.”** Sadie did the Supporting Sister volunteer training, and became a Listener. Sadie knew from her own experience how important it is to feel that someone is taking the time to really listen to you. Peer-led services are central to Aspire's support service model, and Sadie's lived experiences meant that she could relate to other women, empathise with their stories, and had so much to offer as a volunteer Listener.

“Aspire was like my safety net. It was the only thing where I could see myself progressing. And as I did each thing, bit by bit, my confidence grew and I had more belief in myself.”

In 2019, Sadie left her volunteer position at Aspire after successfully applying for a full-time job as a Support Worker. This was a huge step for Sadie, who had never believed she was capable of getting a job or working full time. Sadie came back to the centre as she transitioned into her new role, to gain support and advice from her peers.

“It was the focal point of my life, the Centre: being there, starting off and then gradually changing, doing different courses then moving onto other things, and people having the belief in you that you could do other things.”

Peer-led activities:

GROUP SUPPORT ONLINE

We knew that many of the women we worked with would be among those hardest hit by the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic. National research shows that the pandemic significantly increased social isolation (<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/coronavirus/loneliness-during-coronavirus>), , negatively impacted on mental health, and put more women at increased risk of domestic abuse (<https://www.womensaid.org.uk/covid-19-resource-hub/>). Strengthening social networks and support systems is one of Aspire's central aims across all services. Social interaction was cited as the main reason for referrals from external agencies before the pandemic (based on available data between 01/09/2019 - 23/03/2020). We also know that mental health issues and/or shielding due to physical health conditions isolated women further during the pandemic, meaning that many of the women attending the centre were likely to be at increased risk of isolation. In June 2020, we sent out a survey to women accessing our support groups online. 75% of respondents said their mental health had deteriorated as a result of the pandemic, and more than 80% said they had been feeling stressed and anxious. (12 out of 18 women asked responded to the survey).

In May 2020, we established 3 online, peer-led support groups to help women reconnect during the pandemic.

- **Social Group**
- **Mature friends**
- **Positive Progress**

We also continued to run monthly themed drop-ins online, focusing support around domestic abuse, self harm and suicide prevention. Online groups aimed to provide targeted support to women who were identified as being most at risk of social isolation and deteriorating mental health due to the pandemic. Groups sizes were limited online in order to enable volunteers to adjust to new ways of working, and in recognition of the increased support needs many of the women attending presented with.

“The Aspire group online has been a lifeline to me”



Accessibility

Volunteers were able to provide assistance to women struggling to access online groups, and made further 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 connectivity or lack of privacy in their homes. For some women, these barriers will have prevented them from accessing any online support, and others may feel that online provision cannot meet their needs. Looking at the 4th year of the programme, which was most drastically impacted by the pandemic, if we compare the number of women attending support groups in-centre during the first quarter (117) with the number of women accessing groups online in the final quarter (25), we see that we have been able to provide for less than 25% of the number of women online. We therefore felt that it was vital for us to re-establish face-to-face support groups in centre as soon as it was possible and safe to do so.

Outcomes

As a result of attending Aspire Support Groups online (from survey):



All respondents to the 2020 survey said that they were very likely or likely to attend an online group regularly; 91% 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. Due to the positive response to our online provision, and the unpredictable and anxiety-provoking transition towards fewer restrictions, we continued to offer online group support once face-to-face groups had reconvened in centre. We will continue to monitor the effectiveness of remote provision and are committed to providing online support where appropriate in the future.

RETURNING TO THE CENTRE

The Coronavirus pandemic has had a significant impact on our provision, not only in the immediacy of responding to restricted contact during Lockdown, but also in terms of shaping our support services longer-term. The *Supporting Sisters* project funding enabled us to be responsive to women's changing needs during the pandemic, and this proved vital to the development of our services during this period. The pandemic necessitated a shift away from larger social support groups towards more targeted group support. Since face-to-face services resumed in the Centre, we have prioritised providing focused support in small groups to ensure we can continue to meet women's needs safely. We currently have 4 face-to-face, regular support groups running in the centre:

- A small, socially focused support group for women to develop and maintain social connections
- An introductory support group for women who are new to the centre
- Positive Progress: our structured, goal-focused group supporting women's mental health
- Stay Safe, Feel Well: intensive support for women with lived experience of self-harm, focusing on creative expression, social connection and self-reflection.



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women have accessed targeted group support since the centre reopened

The Supporting Sisters project has enabled us to develop work in specialist areas, particularly around domestic abuse, suicide and self-harm, and financial hardship and debt. During the pandemic, we were able to secure additional funding in these areas, based on our strong support offer of support through Supporting Sisters. Funding from the Durham PCC enabled us to provide practical support to victims/survivors of domestic abuse: 27 women accessed food and essential items through the scheme during the pandemic. We were also selected for a unique opportunity with Self Injury Support, which has enabled us to develop bespoke training for our volunteers, and provide targeted support to women affected by suicide and self-harm. Looking ahead, we will continue to develop our services in these areas, building the skills, knowledge and expertise of our volunteer team.

LEARNING AND LOOKING AHEAD

Key learning

Our approach provides the foundation for key mechanisms of change. Through the Supporting Sisters project, we have learned that our women-centred working model is central to achieving wellbeing outcomes for women across all of our activities. Women experience Aspire as a centre, and while specific activities may target specific outcomes, it is our holistic approach promotes positive change overall. In this way, organisational distinctions between ‘learning’ and ‘support’ services may not be relevant to the women that we support, and future funding needs to reflect the holistic nature of all of our provision. Funding such as the Women and Girls Initiative supports this work, as it focuses on sustainability rather than being project-based, enabling us to be responsive rather than prescriptive in our delivery.

Increasing staff team creates capacity in essential aspects of organisational work. Our organisational aims were met through the development of specialist areas of work in the staff team, including communications, development work, data and evaluation, and service management and direct delivery. While the staff team will be reduced following the end of the WGI funding, we will look to amalgamate roles where possible to retain focus in key areas and build capacity. The introduction of waiting lists in our support services for the first time during the pandemic highlights the changing demands on volunteer capacity. Recruiting a part-time Support Worker has been invaluable in supporting direct delivery, and in managing referrals into the centre through the new first contact system. We are committed to continuing to recruit and train Supporting Sister volunteers to increase capacity, but may also need to look to fund additional paid hours to ensure our support services can meet demand.

Self-worth and self-efficacy are central pathways to positive change for women. In our original outcomes framework for the *Supporting Sisters* project, self-worth and self-efficacy were not clearly defined. However, qualitative evidence from Supporting Sisters clearly shows that these are vital to women’s experiences. Sister Stories demonstrates how varied the impact of increased self-worth can be on individual women, and the many positive outcomes that are founded on feeling valued and worthy. Self-worth increases self-care, reduces vulnerability to exploitation, increases capacity for action, and creates space for women to develop their own sense of ambition and aspiration. Looking ahead, it is worth considering how we might integrate self-worth and self-efficacy more centrally our evaluation frameworks and Theory of Change; while difficult to measure, a sense of self-worth and increased personal belief have proven to be at the heart of the impact Aspire has on women’s lives.

APPENDIX



Theory of change

