

Women's Fund Impact Report 2023 - 2024



**Community
Foundation**

Foreword

The Women's Fund is an important and vital part of the portfolio of funds held at the Community Foundation Tyne & Wear and Northumberland. I took over its management in summer 2023 and, as a feminist, an activist and an advocate, I am fuelled by the heartening power that collective giving can unlock.

A very real strength of the sector lies in the coming together of like-minded people who want to agitate for change, for the women and girls they represent, for their communities, for the sector and for society as a whole. Like lots of notable advances in women's issues, the strength comes from unity, but also a sense of common purpose and determination to bring about tangible change. This fund supports organisations that hold their communities at heart. That is why we continue to prioritise making multi-year core cost grants, so they can get on with the business of empowering women and girls.

That power was in evidence at the brilliantly well attended event held in Newcastle last June that saw a room full of people engaged in discussions about the need for more funding for the sector. As always, we remain grateful to Dame Margaret Barbour for her initial donation of £250k to establish the Women's Fund. It now stands at just under £0.5 million and there are ambitions to grow this to

£1million by 2030. As will be evidenced in the following pages, we know the needs of many women and girls in this region remain acute. We also know that investment in the women's sector pays dividends for society as a whole.

This impact report builds on all that has been achieved to date and directly asks that those of you who can consider making the Women's Fund part of your charitable giving.

Jo Cundall
Senior Advisor, Culture



Vital Signs: through the lens of women and girls

Vital Signs is a Community Foundation resource presenting information about a range of issues affecting our area. It draws on statistics, published research, local expertise and knowledge gathered through funding across the region to 'take the pulse' of communities and inform a better philanthropic response to their needs. A series of published reports focus on ten themes: Economy, Education, Health, Culture, Environment, Community, Justice, Access, Living Standards and Homes. Further information, and the full reports can be found [here](#).

The following is an exercise in using a 'gender lens' to dig further into that research, explore new avenues and consider the issues in relation to their impact on the women and girls in our region. As is often the case (and is also true of those reports themselves) each topic warrants an extended essay in itself and, of course, they intersect. But it is useful regional context for the case studies that follow. It also highlights how philanthropy can help.

It is a sad state of affairs, but a reflection of our society, that when anyone writes about women and the need to centre them in a discourse, there is a backlash. This report assumes a certain level of understanding from the reader that within every issue there are nuances and

exceptions. Our starting premise is that we know when we make things better for women and girls, everyone benefits.

Many of the most pressing issues of our region disproportionately affect women and girls. From the hidden homelessness of women, to the erosion of community early years provision that means poorer women are unable to return to work, the challenges women face are often under-reported, misunderstood and ignored.

Of course, women are not one homogenous group with the same characteristics, opinions, needs and expertise. We know that women of colour, those from poorer backgrounds and those with disabilities face additional barriers and challenges requiring the design of services that seek to engage them. We also note that there are opposing (and sometimes toxic) views around who can refer to themselves as women, and the legal and societal definitions. We are not going to unpick the trans debate here but will state the Community Foundation's position as set out in our Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Policy: that our funding can include separate or single-sex services, which may also, within the terms of the Equality Act, decide whether and how they include transgender people. In short, organisations can set their own parameters within the law.



Underpinning the challenges of addressing the impact of inequality on women and girls is the paucity of gender-disaggregated data available to both policy makers and service providers. There is a burgeoning appreciation of the need to understand how men and women use services differently but there is much work to do. Strategy and policy can only do so much when it is based on generic, one-size-fits-all information. Historically too much time and resource has been wasted in retrofitting services because women and girls have not been considered at the design and implementation stage.

We will take the ten Vital Signs themes one by one, keeping in mind that we seek to highlight how

philanthropy, alongside government policy and statutory services, can help create a more level playing field. At times we will be referencing recommendations made in those full reports, at others we will be highlighting where the needs of women and girls are notable by their absence. It is also worth stating that at the time of going to print, the landmark 'Woman of the North' report was released. Much of what follows here is supported by, and expanded upon, within that larger document.

Health

A stark and sobering first issue where the

North East fares badly against a whole suite of metrics is health. This begins at birth, and key to our focus is the issue of low birthweight. The North East has a regional average of 3.2% against a national average of 2.9%. Low birth weight raises the risk of infant mortality and its effect on normal development and health in later life can also be significant. There is therefore a clear case to be made for increased funding to services for women that reduce the risk of low birth weight, such as those that promote informed choices around pregnancy for younger women, support good maternal health and diet, and reduce alcohol, drug and tobacco use in pregnancy.

And at the other end of the life cycle, in the North East, men and women both live, on average two years less than those in the South East. But bring in the years of expected good health and women have fewer again – than men, and than those in the South East - an average of 59 years. The effect of this is a double whammy as women are more likely to be carers and so those 'good' years may be impacted by addressing the needs of those around them. This suggests that respite care, carers' support networks and friendship/activity sessions are a force for good in keeping an army of women carers less isolated. Philanthropy has a good track record of funding this sort of work.

The bit in between – life – throws up gendered health inequalities throughout as women are more likely to have a common mental health condition, "more

likely to be misdiagnosed and do not receive the same benefits of medical research and development because it has been traditionally based around the male body.ⁱⁱⁱ

There is also a clear link with the social care agenda since most unpaid carers are women. As we face a general population that is getting older and sicker it is fair to say that women will face the brunt of caring for this changing population. Organisations such as Apna Ghar (see page 12), that support carers to ensure they are claiming the benefits to which they are entitled – and not falling foul of the rules around earnings do sterling work and can be supported by philanthropy that prioritises core and unrestricted funding.

Economy

The North East is lagging behind on all the key measures used around economic prosperity; indicators such as unemployment rates, number of businesses for every 10,000 adults, research and development spend per head and productivity all fare worse than national averages. The underlying fact that more women than men have additional caring responsibilities accounts for many of the challenges that they face in being more economically active i.e. having jobs, starting businesses and progressing in careers to senior leadership and board level. As such, this issue is tightly interwoven with many of our other themes.

But let's start with the big one: the

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gender pay gap remains. Nationally it stands at just under 8.3% for full-time employees. This increases to 15.4% for all employees.^{iv} In the North East, women in full-time employment are earning an average of £1.15 per hour less than men.^v In theory, part-time work enables people (disproportionately women) to balance responsibilities but in practice we know that many women will have multiple part-time jobs, or zero-hours contracts, and that the balance is actually a juggle. It is a stark fact that many women are working multiple jobs and still earning less than men. This takes its toll on mental health and quality of life.

There is vast potential in our region to harness the entrepreneurial spirit of a society that wants to build work and business around lives, rather than the other way round. Women-only support networks (both formal and informal) can be a great agent for change and charities like Millin (page 15) demonstrate how that infrastructure can empower women who would otherwise, for societal and cultural reasons, not access mainstream provision.

Homes

Our nation falls short of providing enough good quality homes and affordable rents. Partly because of the gender pay gap, women once again come off worse. They are less likely to own their own home and so more often rely on social housing and private rental. Social housing is stretched and as women are more likely to also be primary carers for children, other factors such as proximity to schools and other

infrastructure become more pressing. National figures for private rents sit at 32% of income, but for women that is 36% of median earnings but only 26% of men's.^{vi}

Homelessness is often portrayed as an issue that affects men more than women. This is statistically true by (outdated) definitions and research methods that count the number of visible rough sleepers, 84% of whom are men. But this belies the fact that women sleeping on the streets have had to take precautions for their safety so are hidden. They tend not to sleep in doorways, but (for example) behind bins hidden away. They will make efforts to blend into their surroundings and thus remain inconspicuous.^{vii} In addition, there are the potentially dangerous situations women find themselves in to avoid rough sleeping. 'Survival sex' can take various forms but a common thread is prioritising sexual relationships or sex work with men that are known to have accommodation.

Tied in to all the discourse around homes is the underlying fact that women are more likely to be the victims of domestic violence. Domestic abuse is the third most common trigger of homelessness, and last year two-thirds of victims were women.^{viii} Therefore, leaving abusive relationships is the root cause of a vast majority of women who find themselves in a precarious housing situation.

These factors all demonstrate a need for women's shelters. But philanthropic support has a role to play in building the infrastructure around which women can

reclaim their lives, build support networks and advocate and agitate for change at policy level. Organisations like Changing Lives ^{ix} are exemplary in this last point.

Culture

Taking part in cultural activities, by which we take a broad definition to include arts, creativity, heritage activities and non-elite sport, gives opportunities to make sense of the world. It also fosters communities and gives back far more than the sum of its parts to society by way of, for example, reducing crime, increasing educational attainment, contributing to economic prosperity and addressing health inequalities.

As such, increasing the range of cultural opportunities will always pay dividends, but the rewards can be exponential for marginalised communities, including women and girls. Furthermore there is a particular need for women-only projects that can cater for the cultural sensitivities of black, Asian and other minoritised ethnic communities.

When we consider sport, there is a pressing need to address the systemic prioritization of boys' and men's sport over that of their counterparts. It does feel that the tide is turning, with the Paris Olympics notable for the first time that Team GB has fielded more female than male athletes,^x notwithstanding the predictable misogynistic discourse this provoked in the media and online. However, the infrastructure to support the girls that these flagships events inspire is still massively underfunded.

There is a particular crunch point in the teenage years when girls aged 17-18 are half as likely to say they 'are sporty' compared to teenage boys. And philanthropists may want to reflect that recent research on girls' use of parks shows they rarely use the multi use games areas and skate parks we often fund.

Education

The positive news is that girls do better academically from primary through to post-16.^{xi} When considering the education attainment gap, it is issues around living standards that should be of most concern with the gap between rich and poor widening, with the North East very much at the coal face.

However, the lack of affordable early years provision is an area of concern. This is inextricably linked to the economy and is also a factor in exacerbating health inequalities. Civil society can go some way to plugging the gap of affordable provision, but the heavy lifting needs to come from an overhaul of policy that puts early education and childcare on an equal footing to statutory school provision.

Whilst women bear the brunt of services that are patchy and expensive, those with children who have additional needs face a tougher fight. Austerity has eroded the statutory provision for our most vulnerable children. We know from the feedback from organisations we have funded, such as Support and Grow North East,^{xii} that it is more often mothers who take on these bureaucratic challenges,

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giving up their careers to fight for their children's right to appropriate schooling, their basic health needs and social opportunities.

It should also be explicitly stated that, as with every other factor throughout this report, there is a need for specialised provision for those girls who, due to gendered factors of disadvantage (domestic and sexual abuse, poor mental health etc.) do not thrive in mainstream mixed gender settings. The example of 'T' highlighted by Choysez on page 19 is a case in point.

Environment

The climate emergency can, on one pessimistic hand, be viewed as a great leveller; the loss of biodiversity and rising temperatures do not differentiate between gender. Except the ability to be able to mitigate the associated risks do. Much of this comes down to money (again) and poorer people, who are more often women, fare worse. Women, as primary carers, are more susceptible to rising food prices due to climate-induced shortages, to increases in fuel prices, to being unable to work because their children's schools are shut due to a heatwave or flood. They are also more likely to say that climate and the environment is important to them.^{xiii}

National (and international) strategies to address these issues are rightly focusing on decarbonisation and investment in green technologies, often referenced hand in hand with plans to boost the economy through job creation. These

sectors have historically been male dominated and there is work to be done, ideally starting with early years provision, to ensure that girls and women are supported to follow this path into the well-paid jobs that are being promised. Again, this will take a specific gendered approach. Within the full education Vital Signs Education report a case study is referenced of a Community Foundation fund that supports female students to study STEM subjects at Newcastle University. These sort of philanthropic initiatives are a good start.

Community

Civil society – people coming together to do things out of care for others – is the key to community strength. Women have historically been front and centre of community action; they do more informal volunteering than men and are also more likely to give to charity.^{xiv} There is a truth to the adage that if you want something doing, you should find a busy woman!

This hasn't always translated upward to the highest level of civic power, as represented by our government, but things are changing. After this year's general election and 100 years of (some) women being able to vote, there have now (cumulatively) been enough female MPs to fill all 650 seats in the House of Commons.^{xv}

The value of supporting, be that with time, money, pro bono support and/or signposting, women-led community organisations is evident. The case studies contained within the monitoring for this



year's round of core grants from the Women's Fund say it all. The range of services, clubs, peer support, professional interventions, programmes and activities is astonishing. And the fact that they are usually, if not always, designed with the women and girls they seek to engage cannot be celebrated enough.

Justice

Conversations about justice, the prison system, reform and rehabilitation are hot topics at the time of writing as thousands of prisoners are released early to relieve the overcrowding in prisons.

We can only skim across this complex issue here but there is a mass of research into the statistics behind the numbers of women in prison: 76% report having

a mental health problem, 70% have experienced domestic abuse and 53% abuse as children, 52% self harm and 72% of women leaving one prison faced homelessness or unsafe accommodation.^{xvi} When these figures are taken alongside reoffending rates (19.3%^{xvii}) it is clear that something is not working. Support for women leaving prison is key.

This leads to conversations about the endemic of violence against women and girls (VAWG):

it remains the case that every three days, a woman in the UK is killed by a man and one in four women experience domestic abuse in their lifetimes. In January 2023, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) latest crime figures stated that sexual offences are at the highest level recorded, whilst police-recorded offences relating to so-called honour-based abuse are also increasing. Overall, 1 in 6 children are estimated to have been subjected to sexual abuse, with girls being three times more likely to experience sexual abuse than boys.^{xviii}

This is an issue of national significance that requires an urgent, active response at a strategic, political level. VAWG is inextricably linked to wider societal inequalities – all women and girls are at risk of it but as with all the other issues we have discussed, those from poorer backgrounds and facing other barriers to inclusion, are less likely to receive justice and support.

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All of the case studies below reference at least one domestic abuse support group; this in itself is sobering. Helping victims of these crimes is a core function of many women's organisations, both informally (for example peer support groups) and formally (for example, facilitating access to legal aid).

But of course, it is an issue for all of society. To maintain the status quo will limit the life choices, influences and outcomes for the next generation of boys who are growing up in an increasingly misogynistic society that narrows the definition of what they can be. A key philanthropic intervention can come in the form of that education and prevention; programmes that seek to educate young girls about the red flags of an abusive relationships as well as modelling positive role models for all can be gamechangers and break generational cycles of abuse and trauma. The West End Women and Girls Centre delivers an award-winning peer educators^{xix} course for young women aged 11-25 years. They do this schools, colleges, youth groups, children's homes and other settings where young women are present.

A final word here that is unlikely to be referenced in the wider Vital Signs reports. Supporting projects that empower and support sex workers is a brave philanthropic move, being as it is a complex, contentious and stigma inducing issue. But there is some amazing work being done by the NE Sex Workers Forum which gives those women specialised support (legal, therapeutic, health, victim support) as well as

advocating, campaigning and training for frontline services.

Access

This thematic review makes a clarion call to support women-only services. Every single case study below shows how that approach works. As women enter those services for one thing, they can be signposted to another and so the building blocks to safer, happier, more prosperous outcomes begin to be put in place.

A secondary call is an insistence of the importance of data that is disaggregated by gender, allowing a better understanding of the way women and girls use services and infrastructure differently, so that policies and programmes can be rooted in evidence. This has been a key ask of the One Million Women and Girls network^{xx} which came together to lobby the incoming North East Mayor to ensure that there is a "concentrated, determined action" to improve the lives of the one million women and girls in the region.

Men and women use infrastructure in different ways and for those public services to work for all, the data needs to be gathered and considered specifically. A real-world key example of this can be found around transport. A much lauded £2 anywhere ticket can work well for those making single journeys, perhaps to and from a city for work. But for those (more often women) that have multiple jobs and caring responsibilities that require several journeys a day, it is prohibitively expensive.

And finally, as stated at the outset, we must not in our clamber to do good and feed the sector, forget the importance of intersectionality. By which we really mean the celebration of specialisms within the sector.

Living Standards

We have talked about 9 of 10 Vital Signs themes. And now we come to Living Standards, which in many ways is the culmination of everything written so far. In the North East, people live shorter lives, and they do so with fewer years of good health. The rates of unemployment are higher but when we do work, we do so in (often multiple) poorer paid jobs. People in our region use foodbanks more and have more problem debt. More of our children are living in poverty.

All of these factors affect wider society. They are acute. But women, more often single parents, or unpaid carers for other family members are disproportionately on the sharp end of it. It would perhaps be too repetitive to expand further. But suffice to say that projects which can prioritise the needs of women will go a long way to levelling the playing field for everyone.

A recent (Sept 24) report by the Womens Budget Group examined the cumulative impact of changes to social security, taxes, and public service spending between 2010-11 and projected to 2027-28 in England. It found that, overall,



women experience a higher average annual loss in living standards than men, losing 9.4%, equivalent to £3,162 per year, to men's loss of 5.8% (£2,395 per year).^{xxi}

In summary, all of this shows that the need for women-led, women-only services is urgent and compelling. The Women's Fund prioritises core and unrestricted funding for these services, giving them the resources they need to reach those women most in need, whilst giving them the space to advocate and amplify their voices as they continue to call for change. **This is the key suggestion for directing philanthropic support to help ameliorate the worst of issues that women and girls in our region face; prioritise, with core unrestricted funding, the work of organisations that are women-led.**

That is why that criteria is defined as essential for the Women's Fund, as evidenced in the following case studies.



They demonstrate the impact of these organisations in those communities. They are in their own words but are edited highlights.

Apna Ghar Minority Ethnic Women Centre

Core costs: £2,500 a year for two years

Apna Ghar continues to be a provider of a wide range of services and opportunities which is helping to empower the Minority Ethnic Women of South Tyneside whilst allowing them to maintain their cultural identity. The multi-lingual staff are part of the community they serve.

We requested the grant towards core costs in order to continue to develop new and essential services for the BAME women but also to support our ongoing daily work through the center.

We continue to offer a range of services including: fitness class, sewing class, daily information, advice and guidance sessions, listening ear service, Domestic Abuse support group, Carers support group, Luncheon Club, Youth Group, Weekly Warm Space Hub (part of the South Tyneside Council programme), English Conversation Classes (for those hoping to study L1 and L2 Carers diploma), ESOL classes, Understanding Enterprise (accredited), Level One Adult and Child carers course, Level Two Adult Care diploma, Basic Literacy Class.

As part of our Domestic Abuse work, we have also been holding women's groups, discussing healthy relationships, mental health and also introducing experts to help and support around issues like housing, Benefits, Gambling and Alcohol abuse, cancer awareness and mini health checks, financial advice and much more based also on the women's needs.

All of the classes, courses and support on offer at Apna Ghar are delivered in accordance with feedback from course participants, members, staff and tutors/facilitators.

Our pioneering Carers project is of particular note. It has been a great success and is making a big impact in the lives of many women and their families as well as the wider community. It has taken some time but, through education, support and confidence building Apna Ghar has helped many women who were uncomfortable to care for male clients to become Carers by explaining that the role is like nurses or doctors caring for male and female patients. This may seem a small thing, but it is seen as instrumental in creating a larger cultural mind shift through its ripple effect as women feel empowered within the community and also gaining employment, serving the community whilst maintaining their cultural identity!

"... I learned a bundle of information which helps me in my personal life and professional life as well. It helped me start a career... I recommend others to do the course because it will help them to start their career confidently and enrich their knowledge about physical and mental health too."

"I'd been to so many interviews to be a Carer, but I couldn't answer the questions they asked. Now, I'm not scared and know how to answer the questions. I was excited when I got the job as I'd been looking for a job for two years."

Bright Futures NE

Core costs: £3,000 a year for two years

Bright Futures has been able to expand its reach and provide greater opportunities across South Tyneside, ensuring continued support and impact in the community. The funding has helped strengthen the infrastructure, improving staff capacity and longer-term planning, ensuring the sustainability of the groups and sessions provided.

As a result of attending Bright Futures, over 3000 individuals have acquired new skills, qualifications, and opportunities to alleviate the impact of poverty on their lives.

At Bright Futures we run various services and groups to women aged 16+ living across South Tyneside. We have further developed our successful Employment Project which provides women the opportunity to gain new skills, confidence, qualifications, training, and support to move into employment. The programme is tailored to the individual needs with wrap-around life and basic skills support, addressing barriers to employment including physical and mental health needs. Project Workers leading the programme have strengthened relationships with partner organisations including Apna Ghar, Tyne Met College and local sixth form providers. Bright Futures offer intensive support to

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young women on a one-to-one basis and as part of a group setting and can help address barriers to employment including physical and mental health needs, financial advice, and support to be able to sustain long-term employment. Through our interventions young women have achieved recognised qualifications, and accreditations, enhancing their employability and access to higher-paying job opportunities including First Aid and Food Hygiene.

We also run a successful Ladies Group for women aged 18+ living across South Tyneside; the group provides women with the opportunity to learn new life skills including cooking, sewing, support to access benefits and any additional support. We've learnt from experience and feedback that the Ladies Group has numerous benefits that contribute to personal growth, social connections, and overall well-being. By providing a supportive environment the women can share experiences, challenges, and successes with their peers. Women stated the group helps reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness.

We have developed a volunteer programme to provide women the opportunity to access vocational training. Our volunteer programme has been carefully designed to reach women who may not have access to formal education or training programmes due to financial, geographical, or social barriers. We have ensured our programme is more flexible than traditional education or training programmes, allowing women to balance their work, family, and any other

employment/training commitments.

Bright Futures have further developed our Young Mums Programme across South Tyneside where it is estimated 65% of children live in poverty. The groups are aimed at providing support, resources and opportunities for young mums and their children to thrive. We take a 2 tiered approach through the delivery of groups which are attended by over 80 young women aged up to 25 and their children as well as intensive support delivered on a one to one basis. We support those suffering multiple disadvantages including poverty, deprivation, unemployment, isolation, loneliness, poor health and wellbeing impacting their ability to meet their own and their children's needs. We provide practical support around housing, benefits, budgeting, employment, domestic abuse and mental health and provide support specific to the needs of children including parenting skills. Groups provide a safe place for young mums and their children to come together to build strong relationship with others in their community and opportunities to work together to tackle issues affecting them, fulfil their potential and improve their life chances.

Through our engagement programmes, women and girls have reported a significant increase in their skills and confidence to tackle the challenges posed by poverty.

The Millin Charity

Core costs: £7000 a year for two



years

Millin has continued to engage women who are facing a lifetime of poverty and unemployment and have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis re-engage with services, connect with their communities, increase skills, knowledge, mental health, independence, and wellbeing through engaging in this Project. 141 women were engaged in total during this funding period April-March 2024.

The women supported come from a range of diverse backgrounds, which enabled the women to come together, learn from each others experiences and enable community cohesion and breakdown of isolation and barriers to social exclusion.

Direct delivery has included welcome meetings, one-to-one action plan appointments, coffee mornings & visit days. Strong partnerships with other organisations, and a desire to address issues around mental health and wellbeing, confidence and self-esteem has also seen delivery of projects to create opportunities for social networks to overcome isolation and loneliness. These include 'Kindness Society' Women's Friendship & Crafts group, Confidence Building & Self-esteem Courses, Crafts & Mindfulness Course, Women's Art Course, 'Developing Confidence & Self-Belief in a Compassionate Way' Week Course, 'Jewellery & Enterprise Course and a Women's Well-being Choir.

In addition targeted programmes have engaged women who have improved their life skills in literacy and numeracy, digital skills and better financial

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management through accredited courses: Level 1 – Improve Maths for your Future courses, NOCN Level 1 Accredited Have a go at Enterprise Course and a Digital Skills Improvement course.

The women have reported a sense of belonging as many have developed networks with each other. They have reported increase in confidence being able to take part in a number of courses, workshops and sessions that has helped them improve their skills and knowledge in areas that can use to move forward and progress their lives. Being able to access the network of support that is locally available including welfare rights services, support for women with poor mental health, domestic violence, local health services and a range of opportunities for further learning, women have felt that their situations had improved and that they were in a better place in their lives.

Sunderland Women's Centre

Core costs: £7,000 a year for two years

Sunderland Women's Centre (SWC) continues to provide important education and training opportunities to women, especially those from Black and Minoritised Ethnic communities.

It is located in an area of significant deprivation and is helping to remove barriers to employment and help

women at risk of long-term and entrenched poverty.

Information from our databases show that 331 women and 44 children accessed the centre and enrolled on the courses we provide. Individual learning plans and monitoring/evaluation show the progression of our learners and show that the majority have continued with further courses and some have moved onto accredited courses further improving their potential in both higher learning and employability prospects

Given the current funding climate the grant we received from the Women's Fund towards core costs has been invaluable. It is vital to SWC to have funding towards these costs to enable us to continue to provide a much needed and vital service to the women of Sunderland and the surrounding areas. We are able to provide an inclusive, safe, stimulating environment for both women and children to develop their confidence and skills. We break down barriers such as lack of childcare, accessibility and affordability so that all those who want to attend are able to do so.

Having funds towards core costs also helps to alleviate some of the stress from our workers allowing us to focus on the services we can provide to all our service users and ensure the centre remains an inclusive, warm and welcoming place for all.

Over the year we were able to offer educational, leisure and health and well being courses. The programme

of courses we offered included Maths and English, ESOL, basic computer and digital skills, History, Psychology and Crime, Confidence Building and craft/ flower arranging. This gave women the opportunity to access courses to enable them to return to education and gain the skills and knowledge needed to achieve their life goals.

The leisure and health and wellbeing courses are a vital part of what SWC offers as it can help women to improve their confidence, prevent isolation and have a positive impact on mental health. Feedback from learners show the positive impact the centre has had on those women and their families and how much they have gained from attending SWC.

Tyneside Women's Health

Core costs: £7,000 a year for two years

Tyneside Women's Health supports women that are facing daily challenges around poverty, exacerbated by the cost of living crisis, including poor mental health, domestic violence and additional caring responsibilities.

We have used this grant as a contribution to core salaries including the Chief Executive Officer. In year 2023/24, she has secured sufficient funding to maintain service delivery. We also reviewed organisation needs and recruited and appointed two new roles: a Receptionist



& Administrator who is responsible for the day to day running of premises and a Finance Officer who is responsible for managing budgets, allocating costs on finance management systems, producing budget reports, etc.

With these two new appointments, our buildings and services run smoothly and effectively. For example, there is now capacity to compile waiting list data which is shared within monthly team meetings to help staff plan delivery interventions based on need. We have reviewed waiting list data, attendance and interventions and outcome monitoring data on an ongoing basis, and have held two staff time out sessions within the year to use this information to improve service delivery. We have since rolled out various new 'open access' and rolling groups to reduce waiting times for women. We now offer a weekly rolling Anxiety, Depression

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& Low Mood group at each Centre, a weekly rolling Women's Wellbeing Group at each Centre, and we have introduced new programmes including Stress Management, and we are piloting a Surviving to Thriving programme aimed at women who have experienced trauma. We are also working to review and streamline our Welcome and Needs Assessment process to make it easier and quicker for women to access mental health support.

We have worked with 607 women across the year, mainly residing in Tyneside with a small number from Northumberland. Of the returned evaluations women 84% have reported feeling more able to manage their mental health, 90% reported a reduction in common mental health symptoms, and 94% reported feeling less isolated.

Women's Health in South Tyneside

Core costs: £7,000 a year for two years

Women were supported with issues around debt, financial hardship, housing, relationship breakdown and working with social services. Additional issues such as isolation and mental and physical health were also addressed.

"When I've been low, it's been really important to know I can talk to you. You've helped me make decisions that I'd struggle with."

The grant covered core costs associated with delivering the advocacy service and the weekly Financial Support Drop in. It is extremely valuable to receive support with core costs which are often difficult to fund.

WHiST supported 205 women via 1-2-1 advocacy or advice through a weekly financial support drop in. A further 104 women engaged in groups covering cooking on a budget, budgeting, and DIY/upcycling.

6 volunteers, who had previously engaged in the poverty project research, trained as Financial Wellbeing Champions and supported the weekly financial support drop in. 3 of those provided 1-2-1 support to women, guided by the Women's Advocate. 10 women worked as Welcoming volunteers and Meet & Greet volunteers to welcome members coming into the centre, provide information on services and support women to engage. 120 women were supported by volunteers in this way. Many more volunteers offered informal peer support whilst chatting to women at drop-ins and social events. Through these informal chats volunteers inform women of support on offer and support them to attend. These roles benefitted both the women who received the support and the volunteers themselves who told us that delivering the role helped them to feel valued, part of their community and that they were doing something worthwhile. They also told us that they increased in confidence and improved their sense of wellbeing.



Evaluation showed us that women felt relieved to have addressed issues, many of which were long standing. They felt better able to work with professionals such as the local authority and social services. Women also felt more able to tell their families about challenges they were experiencing and to receive support from them. Women felt better off financially, more in control of finances and other issues and felt they knew where to go for support if they experience difficulties in the future. Women told us they felt more positive and had increased options after receiving support.

Women who previously felt safe at WHiST but struggled to engage with other services were supported to make external links. 59 referrals were made to partner organisations which included anti-social behaviour team, Children's Services, South Tyneside Homes, Hannays Solicitors, counselling, Key Options, Early Health, Impact Family Services, Police, RCTN, Social Navigator, First Contact Clinical, Hospitality and Hope community shops and local food banks and ACTS.

We are currently focusing on supporting women to prepare for the year ahead, to be in a better financial position, managing their money well through budgeting, and saving if possible. This is difficult for women living in poverty, but they tell us that it helps them feel more in control of their situation and that every little bit of money saved can make a difference to them.

Choysez

£2,000 towards an education and support service for young women in south east Northumberland

Choysez now works exclusively with young women, primarily from South East Northumberland, who have been excluded from school or who are at risk of exclusion. It provides small group classroom based work and focuses on educational attainment and their futures with career work, college applications and CV building as well as extra tuition in Maths and English.

This is an important fund for our project to receive support from as we feel there are shared core values between the fund and our work and the vulnerable young women who need our project.

We were able to work with 90 young women during the period in question some stayed with us for a short time and others are still with us now at the time of writing the monitoring report. It all depends on their needs and aspirations

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and at Choysez we never set a time limit on these.

We had young women who achieved GCSE passes in maths and English despite being permanently excluded from school and sat at home with no support until they joined our project. The young women here have a real voice in what we do and how the project looks and your support helped them design the recreation room.

The following case study shows the issues our young women are facing. They come to us typically with low aspirations and low self-esteem as well as unaddressed issues that led to them feeling in this way, many of them suffer from poor mental health.

T joined us having been excluded from a local secondary school where her attendance was less than 60% and she was excluded from school permanently for persistent disruptive behaviour and defiance. (I have had to read her referral form again to believe this) Fixed term suspensions, truanting, absconding and refusal to follow instructions as well as disrupting the work of others saw her score the highest mark on the school risk assessment for risk taking behaviour.

T is typical of the young women who join us at Choysez. She is a survivor of domestic violence, has a parent with alcohol issues and lives with her grandma. She felt abandoned by mum. School had never discussed these issues with T. T found it hard at first upon joining the project and it took time for her to realise that we were here for her and that

she could trust us. More and more she started to discuss issues in her life, safe in the knowledge that nobody was judging her or putting her under any pressure and also that we understood how this impacts on your wellbeing and ability to learn. Fast forward and we now have someone who attends the project 5 days per week and has an attendance record of 96%. She is proud of the quality of work and has pushed us to more for her. She will eventually leave us not only with GCSE and BTEC qualifications, but with raised aspirations and confidence in who she is and what she wants from life.

Women's Workshop

£6,700 towards salary, utility and rent costs for charitable activities in support of women in poverty in Northumberland

Women's Workshop engages with and supports women in North Northumberland to achieve their goals for economic, social and emotional well-being targeting women who face extra challenges. It runs workshops and campaigns to improve women's equal access to opportunities and have a say on issues that affect them.

Our Development Manager remained in post till July 2024 with support from this grant, and played a central part in shaping future plans. As a result we have raised additional funds to appoint a long-term administrator, an outreach worker



and a 1-2-1 support manager. This will considerably strengthen our core team and our ability to target our support to those women facing the hardest challenges in the current situation.

The year since we received the Women's Fund grant has been both challenging and rewarding. The extra core costs it covered were really effective in opening up time and capacity for us to move forward and plan for a stronger core in future. With the Development Manager's support we have been successful in attracting additional funding through the Smallwood Trust from their Women's Urgent Support Fund, a grant from Levelling Up funds to secure our physical base in the longer-term, and Awards for All funding to employ an outreach worker and develop our reach to women who

are isolated in village settings. We have also been able to join a partnership to attract some adult learning budget funds to keep our training offer going, which includes IAG training for peer mentors to join our team and extend our reach with 1-2-1 detailed holistic support for women struggling with cost of living challenges.

We involved an additional 12 women in a wide range of volunteering roles including maintaining our garden space and growing crops for community use, admin roles, and in a special project to build a straw bale space on a trailer. 6 women benefited from training in the skills involved in this - lime rendering, straw baling and clay plastering, which they put into use to help create a unique extra space for women to use.

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