

the wish centre

WE LISTEN WE SUPPORT WE EMPOWER

Our Impact Report Growth & Development 2011 - 2021



A full text only version of this report can be found at www.thewishcentre.org/resources/articles&research

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CEO INTRODUCTION



Sometimes it's good to lift your foot off the accelerator, take stock of how far you've come and reflect on how you got there. In this Impact Report we have tried to take this long view. We look back over the last decade and consider the journey the Wish Centre has taken over this time, highlighting some key developments with some reflections on how things have changed along the way.

Our team has done some incredible work over the last 10 years and more. I'm so proud of how they have consistently met any challenge and dedicated their whole efforts to support all our clients with compassion, innovation and determination. The impact of their work has never been in doubt and I could not be more proud of each and every staff member and volunteer.

Organisationally, the Wish Centre is quite a different organisation today compared with its 2011 counterpart. While its charitable objectives and commitment to the sector remain the same and undiminished, its scale, structure, operational methods and activities have developed and broadened out of recognition over this time. We are hugely proud of our "whole family" approach, something that is still rare in the domestic abuse arena, and something we have nurtured and grown over the last decade.

As in life, the changes have followed a cycle of ups and downs. The path the Wish Centre has followed over the last 10 years has not been an undeviating upward arrow. Rather it has been a cycle of successes tempered by the occasional loss, obstacle or step sideways. Our organisation is all the stronger and more mature for it. But the unchanging feature through all this has been the positive impact we have been able to make on the lives of our clients, their families and our commitment to them.



Shigufta Khan, CEO

WE LISTEN



CONTEXT & CHAIR INTRODUCTION

WE SUPPORT



“ This Impact Report marks out some of the key changes and developments in the work of the Wish Centre and how it has operated as a grassroots domestic abuse charity over the last 10 years. It has been a privilege to have served as Chair during these years and indeed my links with the Centre go back to its very humble beginnings back in 1989.

The organisation is a very different entity now compared with those days. And the changes in the main have been organic, developing as circumstances, need and resources have allowed. In some cases we have confronted major and sudden challenges but I can proudly say we have met them all and flourished, thanks in no small part to our wonderful staff team and volunteers.

i think the evidence of experience and perspectives contained in these pages is particularly valuable, coming from a frontline local charity and we welcome feedback from those reading the report. Hopefully, the findings and observations will ring true with others across the sector and I believe there are some features which are more widely applicable for healthy organisations in general.

Always being faithful to our mission and objectives to support those affected by or fleeing from domestic abuse, our ultimate goal has been brilliantly summed up by a recent quote from a service user who on leaving the Centre, commented:

“I feel strong and empowered.” Service user

In structuring reports like this, there can be a temptation to place “case studies” at the end in an appendix. We’ve put our case studies throughout the report, they are the heart of it. They are not an afterthought. We have given them the prominence they deserve, illustrating the pain that individuals have endured, along with their journeys to safer and better lives with a little help from us.

For symmetry, we have also book-ended the report with a letter written by one of our amazing survivors who describes her experiences of being supported by the Wish Centre so movingly. ”

Pauline Geraghty MBE – Chair, the Wish Centre

Acknowledgements

We look back with pride over the last 10 years and thank all our supporters who have continued to make our work possible over this time. These include all our staff, volunteers, trustees and also our service users.

None of this work would have been possible without our many funders, large and small, who have given generously their time and resources to the Wish Centre so that we can carry out our mission as a grassroots charity to support victims and families affected by domestic abuse. Special appreciation must go to our major local commissioners of services, Blackburn with Darwen Council, Lancashire County Council and the Lancashire Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner whose support has been immense and highly valued, as ever. Local support from community members, local agencies, groups and businesses has also been fantastic.

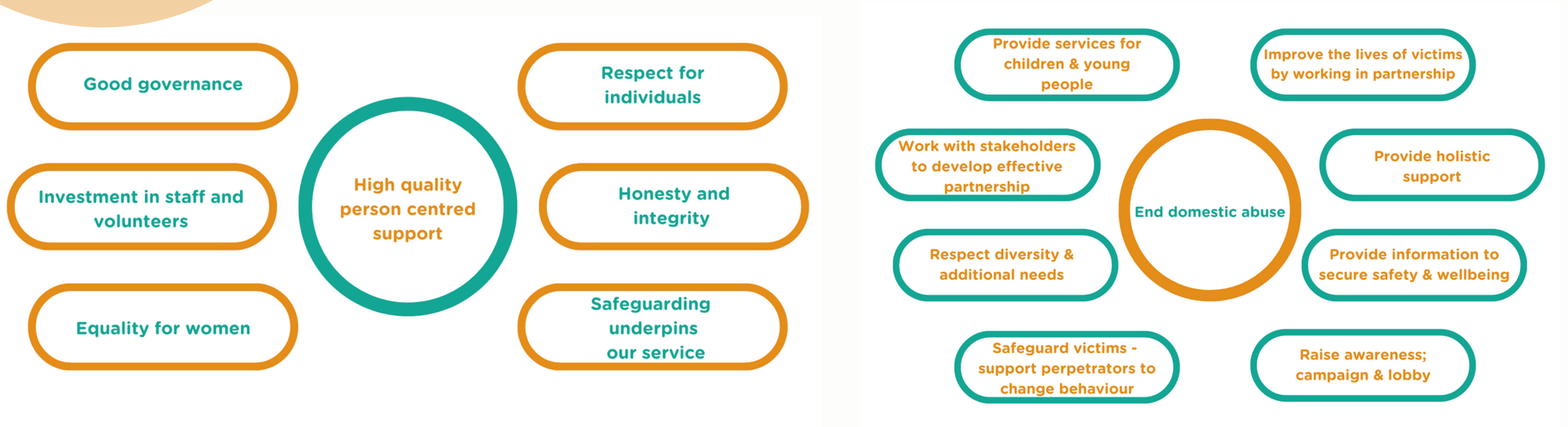
Finally, thanks go to our staff team who contributed their time, information and thoughts to this study and on whose reflections it is based. These are:

- Robyn Ashfield
- Pauline Geraghty
- Lynette Hatton
- Shigufta Khan
- Anna Leicester
- Barbara Martin
- Debbie Springham
- Rebekah Wilson



Values & Objectives

Our values are integral to how we work with clients, stakeholders, funders and partners. They underpin everything we do. Our objectives are what we have worked towards achieving for a decade and what we continue to strive for today and in the future.



Our Work & Impact

Stats and data aren't the whole story. Behind the numbers lie a number of changes and developments over the years which collectively have steadily transformed the Wish Centre, its performance, range of provision and impact on the lives of those we support. We'd look at some of the main changes and features which have defined and influenced the Centre's development.

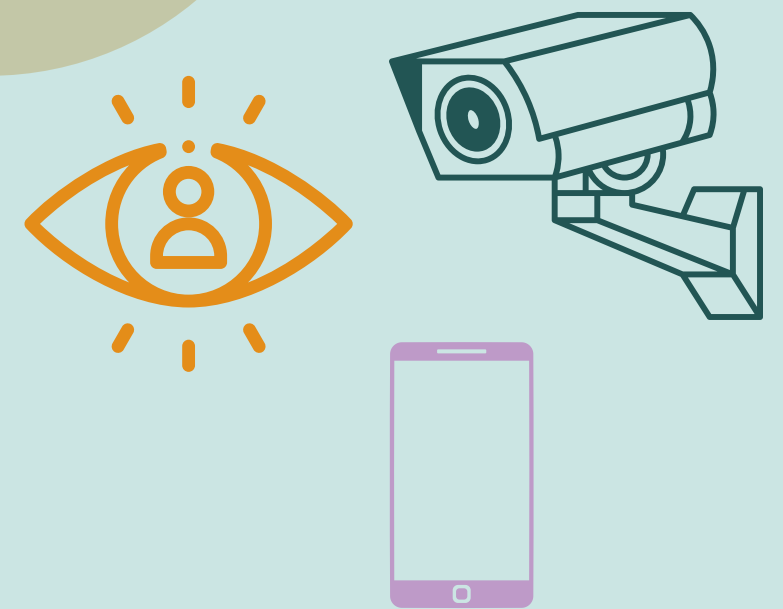
The Nature of Domestic Abuse Has Changed

Staff commented on how the challenge of supporting victims of domestic abuse has become significantly more difficult at the end of the decade compared with its beginning. There has been an increase in vulnerabilities in the victims they see with more clients struggling with their mental health and food poverty (even if they are in employment) than ever before. This trend has been compounded at the same time by a decline in statutory mental health services.



Staff also noted that women are presenting with different levels of vulnerabilities than previously and this has become especially marked over the last 4 years. Staff commented on how victims' initial fears and need for security can be addressed promptly and effectively but their ongoing mental health needs are much greater these days and have demanded ever higher levels of competence and management by staff.

The use of new technology has broadened the spectrum of risk (social media, location and tracking devices and the modern habit of sharing pictures online) which has in turn added to the burden and challenge for staff to manage the behaviour and the heightened and ever-present risk now faced by victims.



"THE BIGGEST SHIFT I'VE NOTICED HAS BEEN THE WAY DA HAS ITSELF CHANGED OVER THE LAST 10 YEARS WHICH MEANS THAT THE CHALLENGES WE FACE NOW HAVE BECOME ALL THE GREATER. THE NATURE OF RISK HAS CHANGED." REFUGE MANAGER

Victim Services

The Wish Centre has naturally always had a very strong victim focus and a tradition of working with all-risk level cases and crisis care. The Wish Centre is imbued with the ethos that no-one is turned away. This characteristic of working with low, medium as well as high risk cases was proclaimed by staff as a distinguishing characteristic of the Wish Centre, compared with many other DA services in the sector.

Services and support have consistently been maintained around advice, continuous risk assessment and safeguarding, safety planning, sanctuary, IDVA support and therapeutic group programmes, AIM and the Recovery Toolkit. These have also been strengthened by counselling in recent years.

The Wish Centre has consistently had good relationships and links with other agencies and services locally. And the charity redoubled those efforts during the middle years of the decade when it did not have the status of commissioned service to fall back on.

We made a conscious effort to build our community profile and sustain self-referrals, and thereby continuing to meet the needs of its service users.

The victim support has now developed further in the decade and the IDVAs role has become more streamlined, as part of a bigger staff team with good transferable skills, boosted by the recovery of the local authority commission for Blackburn with Darwen in 2019.

Covid triggered new models of working including support for victims where the necessary changes enabled more people to engage with the whole process. These have all been key features in the growing quality and consistency of the Wish Centre's support and recovery work with victims over the last 10 years.

Specialist IDVAs



Stalking Advisor



Advice Workers



AIM Programme



Recovery Toolkit



Counselling



Tina's Story

Tina self-referred to the Wish Centre when she had recently moved into our area to stay with family as a consequence of suffering domestic abuse and is a good example of how we have been able to support her needs, recovery and see her in a much more positive position from which she and her children can move on.

She had 3 children removed and now was engaged in court proceedings to regain parental responsibility for her new baby. The local authority (out of area) was advising against the return of the child with Children's Services losing trust in Tina as she had withheld information from them that compromised the children's safety. When we initially started to support Tina, she was not accepting responsibility and instead blaming agencies, minimising the abuse and the impact on her children of living with and witnessing abuse.

We supported Tina with housing and then engaged her on our therapeutic programmes. Tina started to attend AIM (Awareness Insight Motivation) Programme. Tina settled well into the group and was very open and honest. She began to accept responsibility for the choices she made and the impact of these choices on her family, particularly her children.

Tina was able to demonstrate a sustained change in her behaviour. She started to work with professionals, grew in her confidence following the programmes, engaged in counselling and this led to her social worker supporting her and advising a planned return of the baby.

"I FEEL HAPPY THAT THERE IS A SERVICE OUT THERE WHO
REALLY UNDERSTOOD ME AND YOU SHOWED ME SO MUCH EMPATHY
THROUGHOUT" SERVICE USER

Refuge



5 Families



9 Families or single women

The Wish Centre manages two refuges and has provided safe temporary accommodation and support at a high standard for female victims of abuse and their children over the last decade and, indeed, from the organisation's very beginnings over 30 years ago.

The annual throughput of residents in refuge has remained consistent across the decade, with a limit capped by the physical space available. In the 10 years since 2011/12 the combined numbers of women and their children accommodated in refuge have ranged annually from 97 to 150, at an average of 127 women and children per year. The length of stay in refuge varies according to individual circumstance and need.

Two features stand out from the reflections of senior refuge staff on the changes and developments they have seen over the last decade. First, the huge efforts needed by refuge (and the wider Wish Centre) to meet the changing needs and vulnerabilities of victims; and second, the ongoing development and integration of services across refuge and the Wish Centre as a whole.

The workload on refuge staff has become much greater than previously and is a product of the much more highly challenging DA environment which staff are faced with today.

Our report alluded earlier to the increases in complex needs, the changing nature of risk and how the nature of abuse itself has got worse: a decade ago children may have witnessed DVA - and today refuge staff comment that more children have experienced it directly themselves.

The ongoing mental health needs of victims in refuge have become greater today and involve ever higher levels of competence and management by staff. Mental health services struggle to meet demand adequately; and refuge staff have noticed the raised thresholds of getting children accepted as high need enough to be involved with statutory providers. The impact on refuge is immense.

"YOU HAVE TREATED ME WITH RESPECT, KINDNESS & BELIEF" SERVICE USER



Angela's Story

Angela and her children were referred to refuge as their location in another refuge had been discovered by her perpetrator and was therefore unsafe. On arrival with us, they were all quite apprehensive, afraid and not very confident. Staff therefore reassured the family that they would be safe here and fully supported throughout their stay.

Wrap around support was immediately provided from the first day. This included being shown around the property, given a welcome pack, including some food and toiletries and admission paperwork completed. Angela and her children were registered with a GP, Dentist and the Health Visitor. The two older children were registered for school places and the younger child registered for a nursery place. Staff also assisted the resident in changing her address with all relevant external agencies.

A risk assessment and safety plan were completed with Angela by one of our IDVAs and a comprehensive Support Plan tailored to the family's individual needs. Angela has been supported by the Police, Solicitors, Children's Social Care, The Benefits Agency and Housing.

During their stay in the refuge both Angela and her children have received weekly support from Refuge Support Workers and the Children's Workers and they have grown in confidence. Angela and the children attended key awareness courses such as AIM and You and Me, Mum; along with peer-to-peer sessions to make new friends and take part in several activities without their children. The children have started school and nursery and regularly attend children's activities. The children and their mum have also gone on outings to the park with staff and other residents.

Ten months later the family is in a much better position to move on from refuge. They will be able to continue to receive support as/when required from the Wish centre.

**"I FEEL READY NOW FOR THE NEXT CHAPTER,
WITH RENEWED CONFIDENCE AND EXCITEMENT."
SERVICE USER**

Refuge continued

In practice, there has been an increasing reliance on the Third Sector in general before cases are opened by statutory providers. The problem and pressures on staff are compounded by the tendency for service users to stay in refuge for much longer (9 months plus is common), a feature which is commonly seen across the North West. This does not aid the recovery and rehabilitation of victims with the risk of refuge residents becoming over-dependent and institutionalised and their children overly (if understandably) attached to refuge staff.

Demand on staff has also been increased by the trend in recent years for increased numbers of victims and families who are referred without any previous involvement or being known to services. This has increased the workload on staff to get a wider range of services involved to meet their needs.

In response to these latest pressures, the Wish Centre and refuge staff have redoubled efforts and the nature of support. This is integrated with other provision for women and children from the wider Wish Centre. It includes participation in the therapeutic group programmes (AIM and the Recovery Toolkit); in children's programmes like Helping Hands, You and Me, Mum; and Drawing and Talking to address the needs of the children most badly affected and traumatised by the abuse they have experienced; and the opening of a counselling service in Refuge to help compensate for the lack of access to statutory services.

Gaps are filled and support enhanced by as much local multi-agency working as possible, with other local voluntary groups such as Youth Zone being especially supportive; and by training up staff on the Henry (parenting) programme which is certificated for mums and can be delivered one-to-one or in groups.

"THE BIGGEST CHANGE BOILS DOWN TO THE FACT THAT REFUGE STAFF ARE HAVING TO DEAL WITH ISSUES WHICH PREVIOUSLY HAD BEEN PICKED UP BY MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES AND CRISIS TEAMS." STAFF MEMBER

Drawing & Talking
You and Me, Mum
IDVA
AIM
Helping Hands
Counselling

Laura's Story

Laura began a relationship with Jim after her long-term partner had died suddenly. Jim seemed like the perfect man - kind, attentive, supportive and understanding. Within 6 months he had persuaded Laura to spend her life savings on buying a cabin by the sea, hundreds of miles from her friends and family. Within weeks Laura's phone had been broken and she had become completely isolated. Emotional abuse was followed by physical abuse. Laura was made to sleep on the toilet floor regularly.

She was beaten and strangled to the point of being unconscious and she turned to alcohol as a way to try to cope with her fear. Laura had to escape with nothing when her partner left the house for a short time.

Laura had intensive support in our refuge for 2 months, was accompanied to alcohol misuse meetings, mental health appointments and her GP before we supported her to find her own home. She continued to receive support from our outreach team for a further 18 months and from our volunteers for 6 months.

Laura went on courses to build her self-esteem and then found herself in a classroom for the first time in 24 years. Laura now has a professional qualification, is in full-time employment, volunteers for a local charity and lives happily with her dog, Arthur.

YOUR PASSION AND DEDICATION REALLY STOOD OUT TO ME AND HAS BEEN INTEGRAL IN GETTING ME TO WHERE I AM TODAY." FEMALE SERVICE USER

Support for Children & Young People

In January 2020 we published a major internal review of the Wish Centre's work supporting children and young people who have been affected by domestic violence abuse. This can be viewed on our website. The report left in no doubt the scale of this problem and the impact on young lives.

The Wish Centre has steadily developed an imaginative portfolio of support programmes for children and young people to help them overcome the effects of domestic abuse. These include Helping Hands (focusing on protective behaviours); the Young People's Recovery Toolkit (informed by trauma focused cognitive behaviour therapy); Expect Respect (supporting young people to manage conflict); and the Parachute programme which is aimed at young people who are perpetrating abuse themselves. These are age-appropriate, group programmes, with one-to-one support provided, where required and where resources allow.

"I'M STARTING TO ENVISAGE A POSITIVE FUTURE FOR MYSELF AND FOR MY DAUGHTER" SERVICE USER

We have also trained staff to deliver a one-to-one programme which uses "Drawing and Talking" as a child-centred therapy which can be used to deal with mental health issues and heal associated emotional pain. This is for children who have been the most badly affected and for whom group programmes can be too challenging and therefore inappropriate.

Work with children and young people has become a real specialism for the Wish Centre and has earned a well-deserved reputation, recently extending preventative work both with the Parachute Programme (helping young people handle their emotions) and the Respect Young People Programme (RYPP) working together on parent-child relationships with whole families across the whole of Lancashire.

Building up this portfolio of support for children and young people has been hard work. We have naturally welcomed commissioned work in recent years but for most of the decade as a charity we have had to fight for scarce competitive funding from charitable foundations and trusts.

In many respects, notable exceptions aside, funders have traditionally prioritised their support for work with primary victims of DA and children have tended to miss out.

Liam's Story

Liam was referred to the Respect Young People Programme (RYPP) by a Family Support Worker because of his aggressive and challenging behaviour within the family home. Liam lives with his parents and younger brother and the case was open on a CAF at the time of referral. Negative behaviour included assaulting both his parents and younger brother by punching them and causing extensive damage to the house by punching and headbutting walls and doors. He advised that his dysfunctional behaviour escalates when he is feeling annoyed with other people and his brother.

Sadly, Liam's mother is unwell, and this results in periodic admissions to hospital which Liam finds difficult to cope with. Other support already in place included a Youth Engagement Officer, a child psychologist and a specialist Bowel and Bladder Nurse due to Liam struggling with soiling accidents.

A Wish Centre RYPP trained worker was allocated to Liam and a local authority staff member was allocated to work with the parents. Initially, both parents undertook the programme together with very positive outcomes for all. With Liam initially minimising his behaviour and trying to shift the blame, staff worked hard to reframe his thoughts and he really started to enjoy the experience whilst putting lots of effort into the 'assertive communication' and 'conflict resolution' work. Liam's parents were duly made aware of this in order that they could support him in using these newfound skills. More recently, Liam has shown that he is able to take responsibility for his conduct and to recognise that he does not have to 'win' and that resolving conflict is a better outcome.

Liam's school have been very supportive throughout and as the final session of the RYPP approaches, parents have reported an improvement in Liam's behaviour with only one recent incident which was dealt with effectively using the Family Agreement established between Liam and Mum and Dad as part of the programme.

**RYPP | PARACHUTE | EXPECT RESPECT | YP RECOVERY TOOLKIT |
HELPING HANDS | DRAWING & TALKING | YOU & ME, MUM**

Perpetrator Work

Perpetrator work may be unusual for most victim services but over the decade this has become an increasingly important dimension of the Wish Centre's overall provision and forms a vital part of the charity's "whole family approach" for addressing domestic abuse.

Behaviour change work with perpetrators started off in modest ways with limited sessional worker support along with some counselling input for some perpetrators who were likely to engage. This was followed by accelerated growth with the recovery of the Blackburn with Darwen Council commission in 2019. Perpetrator work was then expanded hugely by the successful tender for the County contract by Lancashire County Council also in 2019.

From being a very victim focused service, the Wish Centre now incorporates sustained and systematic support around perpetrators, children and young people. The main DA perpetrator programme run by the Centre is "Make the Change©" (MTC) which now carries the award for the national Respect accreditation standard. Provision is currently being enhanced by the offer of a two-session awareness raising workshop "Gateway to Change"; a less formal, drop-in "Be the Change" programme as a way of sustaining the progress made by MTC; along with partnership work in Blackpool (which as a Unitary Authority falls outside the County Council's remit) to work with complex needs cases and offering holistic and ongoing support.

There have also been positive developments which have been driven by the Pandemic and the need to find ways to navigate round the restrictions on social contact and adopt remote delivery as a way of sustaining provision to service users. This has been particularly useful in our perpetrator work as many client's work long hours and shifts. A recent example of opening up more imaginative access has been the delivery of the MTC Programme online to an eligible man stuck in a European country at the height of the Pandemic.

"I'VE COME FROM A BACKGROUND OF VERY, VERY STRONG BELIEFS. EVERYONE HAS CHANGED ME FOR THE BETTER. I'M LEAVING HERE A LOT BETTER MAN THAN WHEN I FIRST WALKED THROUGH THE DOOR." MALE SERVICE USER

Stuart's Story

Stuart was referred to The Wish Centre by Children's Social Care because of concerns around his behaviour in previous intimate relationships.

At the time of being accepted for the Make the Change© perpetrator prevention programme, Stuart had been convicted of two domestic assaults involving his ex-partner and their young son. He was being supervised by the National Probation Service having been sentenced to an 18 month community order, 30 days rehabilitation activity and was to undertake a domestic abuse programme in addition to 120 hours unpaid work. Also, Stuart was to access an anger management programme whilst continuing to work in a fulltime sales position, being the sole income provider in his household.

Despite a 'shaky' start, Stuart quickly settled into the group programme which he accessed online, acknowledging his aim to change his behaviour around anger, his ability to empathise with others and address his use of cannabis. Facilitator feedback evidenced that Stuart was a positive influence within the group and was willing to reflect on his abusive behaviour and the impact of this on his ex-partners and his children.

As he put it, he had to come to terms with his previous experiences:

**"I CANNOT KEEP USING MY PAST AS AN EXCUSE"
MALE SERVICE USER**

Strategy & Growth

Strategically, our focus has been on four main objectives:

To provide outstanding support & service to everyone who comes for help.

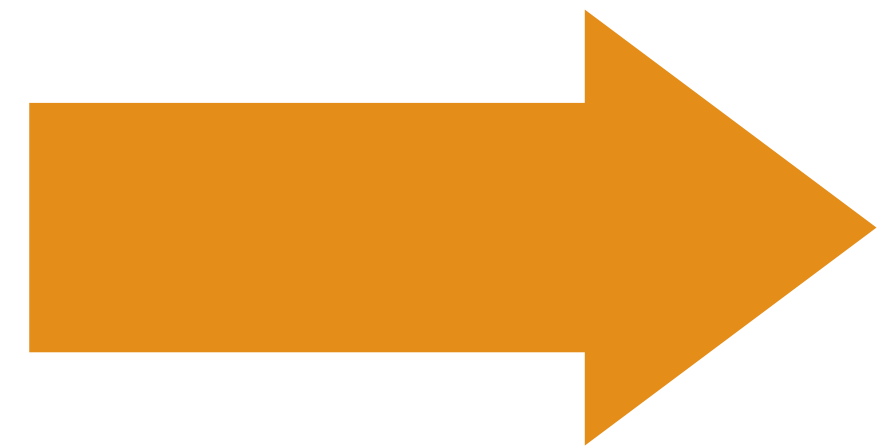
To develop & enhance our services to meet increasingly complex issues.

To manage the charity effectively, investing in our people, brand & fundraising

To campaign to raise awareness of the domestic abuse agenda, locally & nationally

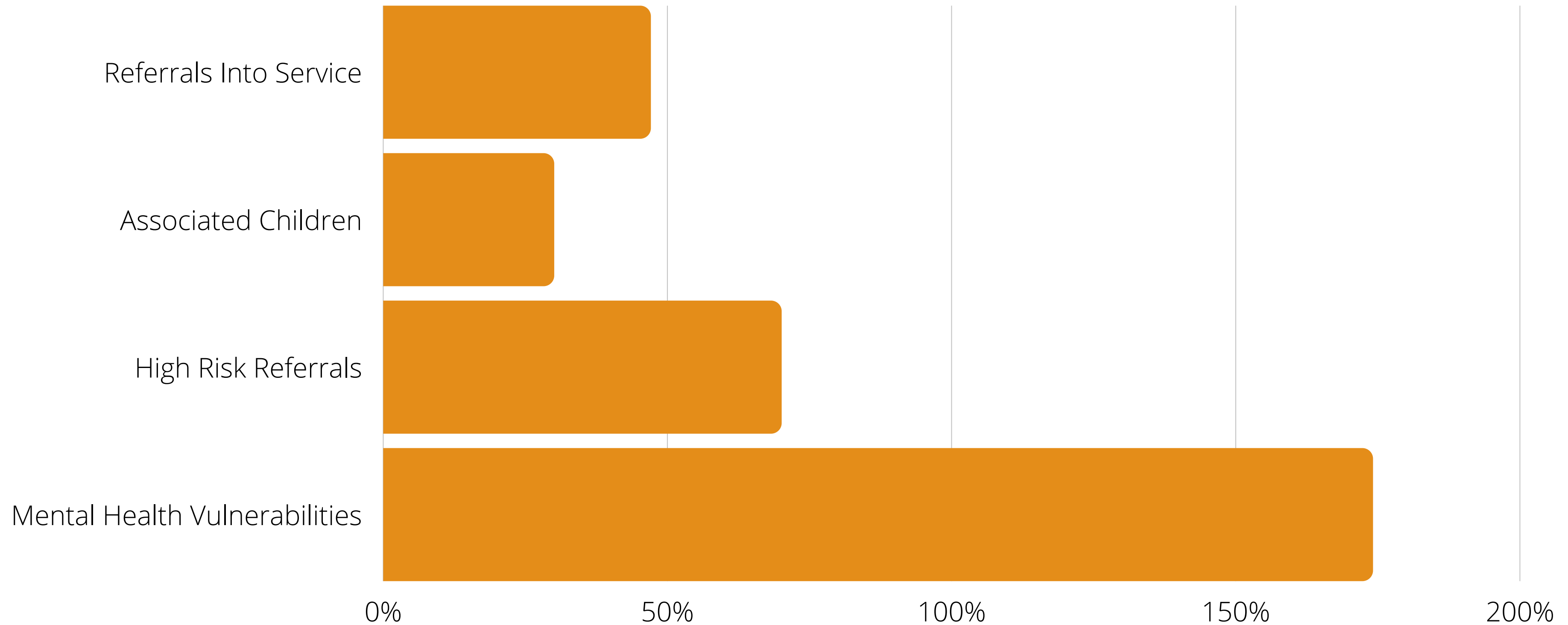
"IT'S IMPORTANT IN OUR SECTOR FOR US AS A GRASS ROOTS DELIVERY ORGANISATION TO LOBBY FOR ISSUES AND CONCERNS. IF YOU DON'T STATE YOUR OPINION, YOU CAN'T COMPLAIN AFTERWARDS." STAFF MEMBER

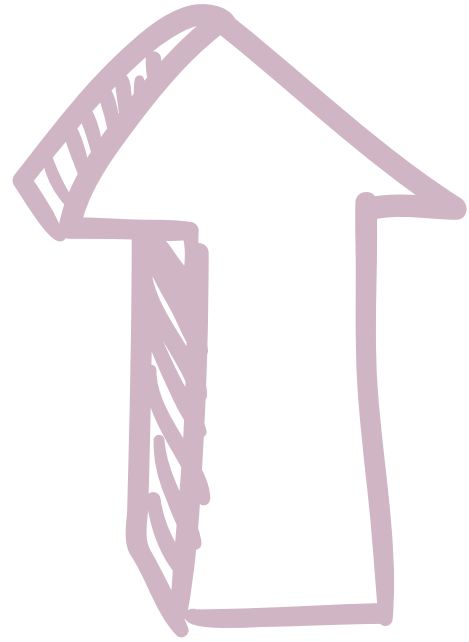
The Strategic development of the organisation and its impact, in line with these objectives, can also be seen in the upward trajectory of the following core performance statistics over the last decade. Output numbers only tell part of the story of impact but they still demonstrate a pattern of growth.



Service Output Data

The following graph charts the increases referrals (in percentages) in some of the core performance output data over the last 10 years. This illustrates the growth in demand across the service generally in the past decade.





Referrals for victims programmes (AIM & Recovery Toolkit)

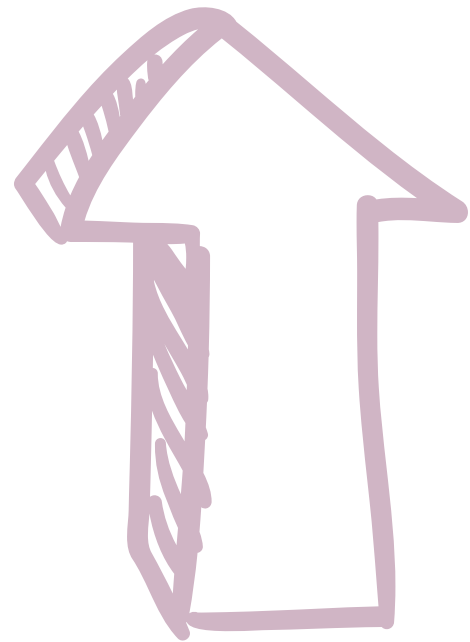
363%

Sources of referrals have remained the same across the decade, mainly:

Police

Children & YP Services

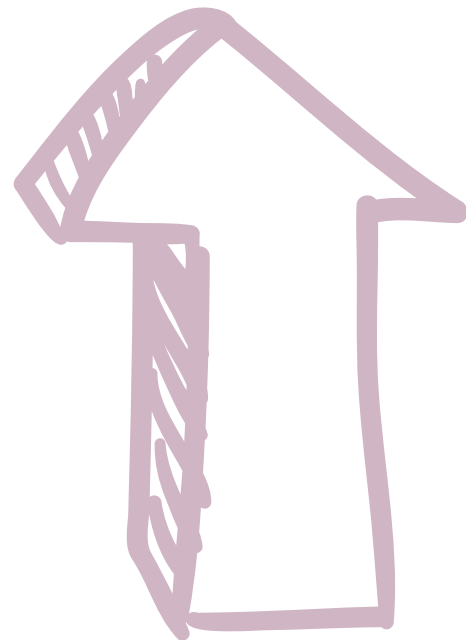
Self-referrals



Referrals for Children & YP Programmes

792%

Children's work has been funded largely by competitive bids to charitable trusts and foundations. The range of programmes available has increased and work has expanded from Blackburn with Darwen to Lancashire wide and Blackpool.



Referrals for Perpetrator Programmes

605%

The growth of Perpetrator Programmes and support around behavioural change has also been developed significantly over the decade. At the beginning of the decade our perpetrator work was confined to Blackburn with Darwen but expanded into Lancashire in 2019 and Blackpool in 2021.

Corporate Strengths

A strong corporate culture and identity has underpinned our services. They are enduring strengths which have been vital in the transformation of the organisation, which have made it ever more resilient.

Getting the Culture Right

A move to a charity based on structured, professional planning becoming more strategic in its approach.

Devolved Management

A change in the management structure with the introduction of a middle-management tier supported by a senior practitioner

Integration

An "open door" culture where liaison is a regular occurrence between teams, management and Board - in both formal and informal ways.

Supportive Board & Chair

The Board & Chair are responsive to the needs of service users and staff with the Chair & CEO having a close working relationship.

Diversifying our Funding Base

Scoping out gaps in local provision and identifying funding sources then rolling out a steady programme of funding applications.

Cultivating External Relationships

Conscious efforts to build relationships with key organisations both locally and nationally. This enables us to contribute further to the promotion of our cause.

Strong Investment in Staff

A conscious decision to identify recruits with transferable skills from relevant backgrounds and invest in a heavily revamped training programme.

PR, Social Media & Fundraising

A massively upgraded approach to social media, sharing of resources useful to the public, agencies & professionals. An offer of training to external agencies and businesses.

The Future & Challenges Ahead

Celebrating our development, innovations and progress over the last decade does not mean we are blind to the challenges of the future. Real progress has been made across the sector legislatively with the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 and the creation of a statutory definition. Children and young people have been included as victims in the definition which we welcome, and it is hugely important that this has been acknowledged. There is also a concentration on perpetrator work which together endorses our own efforts in these two areas.

Our task in the coming years is to see that local implementation of the Act in its various aspects and phases work well on the ground. We will be alert to issues and problems and lobby accordingly. Immediate worries include the suitability of agencies with relevant experience offering themselves as refuges or safe accommodation for very vulnerable victims; and the lack of provision still for those with no recourse to public funds.

The impact of the Pandemic on our working practices has been a double-edged sword. It has certainly been a catalyst for innovation; changes in working lifestyle have been appreciated by staff; and greater access and reach to service users previously seen as a problem have been definite steps forward. But it has certainly taken its toll on staff.

That said, the progress we have made has been remarkable. The Wish Centre has grown organically from a very small refuge 33 years ago into a “whole family approach” support service, expanding particularly over the last decade with specific expertise and staffed by people largely from the local community.

The challenges will be there in the future and there will be difficulties ahead - there always are. But as a team we can take these on with confidence.

**“THE WISH CENTRE IS A VERY RESPONSIVE ORGANISATION -
ITS STRENGTHS MATCH ITS GROWING REMIT AND SCALE.”**

STAFF MEMBER

A Survivor's Letter

“**We recognise heroic efforts that come with a flash and a bang** - so prominent that you can't help but acknowledge them. But I would argue that the most heroic efforts are those orchestrated behind the scenes, that **seamlessly stitch a life together** without calling attention to themselves. The Wish Centre in Blackburn is a hub of unappreciated heroic acts that I've silently witnessed for more than a year.

I am the mother of four young boys - a four-year-old, a three-year-old, and two 18-month-old twins. To say that my hands are full is putting it lightly. I am a candle burning on both ends but you'd never be able to tell. **I put on a strong front** and it takes a searching eye to recognise when I'm drowning. In July 2017, I left my abusive marriage and travelled a gruelling five hours in a cab from London to Blackburn.

I remember standing before the doors of the Wish Centre. My vision had tunnelled and a deep exhaustion had settled over me. **Had I made the right decision?** A support worker came forward with a smile - then another, then another. Each took a child, ushered me inside and happily shushed them. I reached the refuge twenty minutes later and was introduced to my new home for a year.

Dignity is a basic human right and I was stripped of it living in an abusive relationship. The people at The Wish Centre, from their trustees, to their support workers, down to their volunteers, are hell-bent on restoring your dignity and they do it in the most respectful, seamless way. Every day was an opportunity for them to help me believe in myself again, and they welcomed these opportunities with open hands. You see, **it's the little things that matter**, that make a difference. It's the little things that restore a person's dignity, not the flashes and the bangs. It's building trust and showing that you care, not because it's a job, but because you acknowledge the humanity in another.

Then there were the support workers who would come knocking on your door every morning to ask how you were doing. They called it a welfare check, but it was more than that. It was a reminder: 'I am here and I care if you are alive and functional today. What can I do to help?' **I am not the person I was a year ago.** I am stronger, wiser and more confident than I was even before my abusive relationship. I shine and everyone can see it. My children are happy and it is so obvious.

I have no doubt that if the people at the Wish Centre remained unacknowledged, they would continue as before, working tirelessly to restore dignity to the women and children of UK. But I think these unsung heroes merit the attention and thanks of their community for the service they dedicate themselves to everyday. It is **my deepest hope** that you will agree with me and champion their heroic acts in the manner that they deserve. “