

Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid

Mapping of Local Support for Women in Birmingham

Sophie Dixon



**labyrinth
project**

This report was produced under the Labyrinth Project and delivered by Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid.

January 2022

The Labyrinth Project

Women often have a range of issues in their lives including Violence Against Women & Girls (VAWG), financial, employment and legal issues, but it can be hard for them to access the support they need across multiple agencies. There is a lack of joined-up, holistic, women-centered services despite many groups and organisations doing good work with and for women. The Covid-19 pandemic has increased the impact of these issues. With partners across England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, the Labyrinth Project aims to support women's spaces and services to help them, and the women they support, to emerge stronger from the damage that the pandemic is having on women's lives.

Funded by a grant from the Department for Digital, Culture, Music and Sport, the Labyrinth Project is contributing to system change for women by building capacity and forging stronger networks of support and shared learning locally and nationally. It focuses on education and training, awareness raising, building self-confidence, expansion of choices, increased access to and control over resources, actions to transform the structures and institutions that reinforce and perpetuate gender discrimination and inequality. The Project will also improve access to help with finances, debt and legal rights.

The Labyrinth Project is formed of the three strands below:

- Local Capacity Building – strengthening the women's sector at a local level by mapping the support currently available, building networks and increasing the influence of the women's sector on local strategy and decision making.
- The Empowering Women Fund grants scheme - supporting organisations that are led by and for women to build their capacity and develop innovative ways of empowering women in their local area.
- National Women's Centre for Excellence – building a collection of knowledge, evidence, resources and tools based on experience by and for organisations within and supporting the women's sector.

Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid

www.bswaid.org

For over 40 years Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid [BSWA] has provided front line domestic violence and abuse support services to women and children in the Birmingham and Solihull area.

Contents

1. Introduction.....	3
2. Local context	5
3. Findings	6
4. Implications of the mapping for project development.....	11

1. Introduction

Purpose of the mapping

As part of the delivery of the Labyrinth Project, Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid (BSWA) has undertaken a mapping report for the following reasons:

- To gather intelligence on the range of services available for women in Birmingham
- To identify specific services in the areas of VAWG, employment, financial and legal support
- To identify gaps in provision and barriers to access including for particular groups of women
- To explore the extent to which services are 'joined up' across the area and across different issues

What the mapping covers

The mapping area is Birmingham. BSWA provides services across Birmingham as well as Solihull, a large suburb to the South of the City. However, it was decided that this mapping exercise would focus solely on Birmingham to make the outcome more realistic and achievable.

How the mapping was undertaken

BSWA produced 2 surveys, one aimed at professionals to complete on behalf of their organisation and another for female service users (not restricted to BSWA). These surveys were electronically sent out to organisations working in Birmingham, including generic services working with both men and women. Professionals were requested to complete the survey on behalf of their organisations and to encourage female service users to take part in the other survey. In addition, the surveys were shared on the BSWA Facebook group, the BSWA website, internally with BSWA staff, on the Muslim Women's Network virtual Hub. Colleagues at BSWA also sent it out to their contacts.

The BSWA Labyrinth Project Navigator also arranged a virtual focus group for women to attend but unfortunately no one attended. She held one focus group with the residents of a BSWA refuge; this was attended by 2 women. Other refuges were too busy with Christmas preparations and outside agencies didn't respond to requests to access the views of their service users. Consequently, the number of service user responses is very low, currently 4.

There were also several interviews held with key women-only agencies. The decision to target women-only services was made in order to try and gain access to service users for their views too. Interviews were held with the following professionals:

- Marcia Lewinson – WAITS (Women Acting In Today's Society)

- Jacky Mulveen - WE:ARE (Womens Empowerment and Recovery Educators)
- Lisa Thompson – RSVP (Rape and Sexual Violence Project)

BVSC (Birmingham Voluntary Service Council) carried out a very similar mapping exercise earlier in 2021, on behalf of Birmingham City Council, with a focus on domestic violence. As a result, some of the feedback that we received from both professionals and service users was that they felt they had been ‘surveyed to death’. For the purposes of this report and to enhance the results of the Labyrinth mapping exercise this document refers to the BVSC mapping outcomes in this document as appropriate.

Below is a list of the organisations that were approached directly to take part in the mapping exercise. This list is not exhaustive as colleagues within BSWA also sent out information to their own networks. They are separated into those who responded and those who have yet to respond.

Responded

- RSVP
- WE:ARE
- WAITS
- Women with Hope
- Arthur Terry School
- Grendon Billesley Nursery and Family Centre
- Shanti Aid
- BSWA
- Elayos

Haven't yet responded

- Roshni
- Anawim
- Muslim Women's Network
- The Women's Consortium
- BSVC
- Birmingham LGBT Centre
- Barnardos
- Forward Thinking
- Kings Heath Action for Refugees

As the number of responses was low, we will continue to request responses to the surveys going forward to help shape the project.

2. Local context

Birmingham has a younger, more diverse population and higher than average levels of deprivation compared to the rest of England. Here are some statistics of interest:

- Total population of Birmingham is **1,137,150** people (2017). **40%** of the population are aged between 0 to 25 years, **13%** of the population are over 65.
- **43%** of Birmingham's population live in the 10% most deprived areas in England according to the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019. **51%** of these residents are children aged 0-15.
- Birmingham ranks **17th out of 326** English local authorities for fuel poverty (high energy costs, low income).
- The 2011 census showed that **42.1%** of Birmingham's population are made up of BAME groups (compared to 15% in England overall).
- Life expectancy in Birmingham is lower than the national average. For males life expectancy at birth is **77.2** years (England 79.5) and females **81.9** years (England 83.1).
- Infant mortality is an area of concern: the rate was **7.5 per 1,000** live births during 2013 to 2015; this compares to 3.9 nationally.
- Less than **1%** of supported working age adults with a learning disability are in paid employment compared to **6%** nationally (2016-17).
- Hospital admissions for those aged 65+ years relating to mental health have increased by **25%** since 2013.

3. Findings

What support is currently available for women in the area(s)?

The current model of support consists of several women-only organisations with the larger ones focussing on VAWG issues. There are also several small, localised women's groups providing a range of services to various groups of women including survivors of VAWG (including forced marriage, FGM and sexual violence), offenders/ex-offenders and BAME women.

VAWG provision

Currently, BSWA manage six refuges (including one for young women aged 16-25), Birmingham's DA hub, outreach services, women's safety unit and helpline, and offers training and consultancy on all aspects of VAWG. There are specialist workers to help women into training/employment, to support older women and women with children under 5. There are IRIS Advocates training GPs and medical staff around DV as well as a young persons' worker who goes into local schools and colleges. IDVAs are based at the local hospital and also in children's centres. The Home Options Service supports women to access accommodation.

Anawim Women's Centre provide support for offenders, survivors of domestic abuse and sexual violence, as well as housing advice and therapeutic courses for women with mental health issues.

Roshni support BAME survivors of domestic violence including forced marriage and honour-based violence. Services include outreach, counselling, floating support, and refuge accommodation.

WAITS provide support to survivors of domestic violence and women with a history of offending and complex needs.

WE:ARE deliver a range of awareness, empowerment and parenting programmes for survivors of domestic violence as well as a range of workshops and activities.

RSVP support survivors of rape and sexual abuse. They offer a range of services including advocacy, counselling and access to health and legal services.

As well as these women only VAWG service providers, there are a range of generic services which are commissioned by Birmingham City Council to provide accommodation and/or support to survivors of domestic violence. These include Gilgal, Cranstoun, Crisis Centre, Salvation Army, Trident and Accord.

Service users who responded to the BVSC survey described positive and helpful experiences from using women only VAWG services in Birmingham, which helped them to understand and identify signs of abuse. One third stated that they felt happier, empowered

and/or more confident. One fifth of women reported feeling listened to, and that they had received strong emotional and practical support. The presence of a dedicated specialist support worker was key to this. Service users who recounted negative experiences with services did so due to limited resources/help available.

Employment

Birmingham City Council run an EU-funded multi-agency project called PURE, providing support to vulnerable adults with complex needs around accessing employment and training. This is not a women only service, however BSWA runs a small part of this project specifically targeted at supporting survivors of domestic violence to access education, training and employment.

Finance

The Project Birmingham provide welfare benefits and debt advice to men and women.

Birmingham Settlement offer money advice and training opportunities for all with specialisms in support for families and older people.

Step Change provide debt advice for all.

Legal

Survivors of domestic violence are signposted to the Rights of Women national helpline and website for issues such as injunctions and child contact. At BSWA we are looking into setting up a partnership with StreetLaw for women to access legal workshops around housing and domestic violence.

Birmingham Law Centre provide free legal advice for all on areas including family, immigration, debt and housing.

Refugee Migrant Centre Birmingham offers legal advice on immigration, health, welfare and housing. This is not a women only service.

ASIRT – Asylum Support and Immigration Advice Team provide specialist legal support around asylum claims and applications for recourse to public funds. Again, it's not a women only service.

What are the main gaps in support?

83% of professionals who responded to the BVSC mapping exercise believed that there are gaps in service provision for women. The most commonly identified gap by professionals was poor access to and quality of housing. 51% of service users who responded had a housing need and 27% found it difficult to access any type of accommodation.

Another gap identified by both professionals and service users was a lack of partnership working. Professionals reported that communication between agencies was poor, and some organisations were working in isolation. This was echoed by service users who there was a lack of multi-agency working and a holistic approach to supporting women. Some agencies were unable to signpost to appropriate services, and statutory services in particular, with Police and social services unaware of what support was available.

Both professionals and service users identified that there is at times a lack of understanding and/or awareness of domestic abuse amongst partner agencies. In fact, 97% of service users said that awareness of domestic abuse needed to be raised and a further 25% more specifically identified a lack of understanding by statutory frontline services (i.e. Police and social services). This suggests a training need and is something that BSWA and potentially other training provider partners could address as part of the Labyrinth Project action plan. This would of course be in addition to the Labyrinth Training Programme for professionals which continues to be rolled out throughout the course of the Project. Other specific training needs which were mentioned included so-called honour-based violence, safeguarding, working with children and legal remedies for survivors of domestic abuse.

Other gaps identified included therapeutic and long-term support for women (particularly around the emotional impact of domestic violence), befriending and access to legal aid/representation.

Interestingly, everyone who responded to the Labyrinth survey (both professionals and service users) believed that there was inadequate support for women experiencing financial abuse, needing legal assistance or access to employment/training. These are the three main strands of the Labyrinth Project.

What barriers prevent women from accessing services?

Many of the responses to the Labyrinth mapping exercise highlighted language as a barrier to accessing services for women with English as a second language. Another was immigration status, especially with No Recourse to Public Funds or having refugee status. Mental health, particularly anxiety, was also identified as a barrier, as was a fear of being judged and/or evaluated by services.

As previously mentioned, service users reported a lack of understanding around domestic violence, particularly within statutory services and generic services. This coupled with the stigma and lack of belief which can surround disclosures of domestic violence, creates a significant barrier for women accessing services.

How well are women's voices represented in the area?

WE:ARE have a particularly vocal service user group thanks to their therapeutic group work programme. During the BSVC Needs Assessment exercise earlier in 2021, a number of

these service users were invited to speak at a parliamentary select committee, giving their views on domestic abuse services in the area.

Considering the number of women only services in Birmingham it was difficult to find a group who are routinely vocal in decision making and planning services. Even within BSWA there is no formal service user group. This is something that we could consider addressing via the Labyrinth Project.

What are the capacity building needs of the sector?

VAWG

Strengths identified within the VAWG field included the quality of refuge provision and support from staff, support provided by Children's centres (there are 5 within the city of Birmingham), and the ongoing therapeutic support from We:Are. Anawim and BSWA were specifically named, by both organisations and service users, as agencies who provided a high standard of support. This valuable work is something that can be enhanced by improving networking and collaborative working between the VAWG agencies, as highlighted by respondents to the mapping exercise.

Legal support

As stated earlier, legal support for women was identified as a gap in the responses to our survey. More specifically, access to legal aid and affordable legal advice for women on low incomes or those with no recourse to public funds.

In the year March 2020 to 2021, domestic abuse accounted for 20% of all crime in Birmingham and 73% of victims were women. Domestic abuse related crimes have increased by 81% in the last three years. West Midlands Police dealt with more than 4,000 domestic violence cases in the first month of lockdown (March 2020). MARAC referrals have increased by 120% in Birmingham since 2017, with 94% of victims being female.

Despite these huge increases occurring in Birmingham, positive legal outcomes are decreasing. In 2020 to 2021, the rate of cases resulting in a charge or summons was 4%. In this context, it is clear that improving access to legal support for women is a valid need which should be addressed via the Labyrinth Project. Whilst several legal advice agencies were mentioned in the mapping exercise as providing quality support, there may be a need for more specialist advice targeted towards women.

Financial support

Another identified gap in provision was financial/debt advice. As we have seen, 40% of Birmingham's residents live in deprived areas. Additionally, there is much evidence to show that women are economically disadvantaged due to the working in lower paid sectors and the gender pay gap. It would therefore be fair to assume that some women in Birmingham will be experiencing financial hardship. Add to this economic abuse and there is a need for

specialist advice and support. Respondents to our mapping exercise felt that there isn't currently enough support available for women, especially survivors of economic abuse.

How good is joint working and collaboration?

There are a large number of strategic boards which BSWA plays a role in. They are strategic in nature, at managerial level. Both the Labyrinth and BVSC mapping exercises identified a need for frontline services to work together more, share expertise, good practice and collaborate on projects. In addition, some organisations feel they are working in isolation, and this has been heightened due to Covid 19.

What impact has COVID-19 had on provision/capacity?

Service users reported a loss of face-to-face work and staff shortages as detrimental to the service they received. They also reported feeling more isolated and less able to network with other women who had had similar experiences.

Professionals reported being inundated with work due to massive increases in demands for services. There was a suggestion that the situation had highlighted the poor level of knowledge around the work of partner agencies, that some were receiving inappropriate referrals for example.

4. Implications of the mapping for project development

This section of the report highlights the main findings from the mapping exercises (both Labyrinth and BSVC) with a view to identifying areas of work for the Labyrinth project going forward.

There is a need for **increased networking amongst agencies**, particularly for frontline workers. Many feel that they are working in isolation and that there is a lack of knowledge around the nature of the services that agencies provide. This could be rectified by regular opportunities to meet and share good practice and discuss any collaborative projects that may improve outcomes for women in Birmingham. In the experience of the Navigator, it is important that these discussions are communicated into the existing strategic level fora. This could also help to ensure that women's voices are being fed into decision making environments. Some VAWG organisations sit on key boards such as safeguarding adults for example and part of their role is to speak on behalf of their services users. However, it appears that there is still work to be done, around improving women's access to services in general (i.e. not VAWG related) and the presence of a women's focus group.

Another priority for Labyrinth should be to address the need for **domestic abuse awareness training for professionals**, in particular debt advice, legal advice and employment/education support services. Some of this work can be incorporated into existing training resources at BSWA and some can be discussed with partners such as Anawim and RSVP with a view to improving responses for women who have experienced abuse.

Many respondents to the mapping exercise mentioned **long term therapeutic support for women** as a gap in provision. There is already a high quality programme of support available from We:Are and WAITS. However, they are both often working to capacity and waiting times for services such as counselling for example can be long. A priority for Labyrinth should be to find out about any other services that can be accessed by women in Birmingham, working alongside local statutory and voluntary sector mental health and wellbeing services.

Childcare was identified as a barrier for women to accessing services. This is a need that could be addressed by improving working relationship between childcare providers and other services for women. Affordability is of course an issue here! The children's centre model works well whereby there are childcare services and other services available under one roof.

Another gap in service provision for women identified via both the Labyrinth and BSVC mapping is access to **affordable quality housing**. BSWA runs the Domestic Abuse Home Options Service on behalf of Birmingham City Council. This service is for women (and their children) facing homelessness due to domestic abuse and can support women around temporary accommodation/refuge as well as with housing applications. There is also

support for those who wish to feel safer at home through civil orders and Sanctuary schemes, and around housing applications. The service is provided within BSWA's Hub along with a helpline and web chat provision. The Home Options Service sees not only the gaps in refuge provision and women-only temporary accommodation, but also the lack of truly affordable family housing within the city. As Jess Phillips recently stated in an interview with the Guardian, there is nowhere in England that a single woman earning an average wage can afford to rent privately.

Regarding actions for the Labyrinth Project around access to affordable quality housing, there may be scope for the BSWA Hub to be used as a model of good practice for other organisations or even as a pathway to housing providers with a view to offering training around domestic abuse.

Lastly, access to **Legal support** for women, namely issues relating to family law and child contact but also employment law. At BSWA we are in the process of working with StreetLaw to provide legal workshops to women with the potential to open this out to other organisations.



Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid
Ryland House
44-48 Bristol Street
Birmingham
B5 7AA

Email: info@bswaid.org

Reg. Charity No: 1073926
Company No: 3509538 SCO21846



**labyrinth
project**

This report was produced under the Labyrinth Project and delivered by Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid.

January 2022