

IMPACT REPORT 2020



Safety

Collaboration

Empowerment

Informed Choice

WELCOME FROM OUR CEO & CHAIR

Much of the last year has been impacted by Covid, both for us as an organisation, with staff facing personal and professional challenges and for the clients we support who reported more domestic abuse, more financial hardship and greater mental health challenges. I continue to be proud and grateful to be part of the team at Stepping Stones. Much of our focus has been to 'keep the show on the road', managing fluctuations in referrals and the increases in complexity and urgency of need. But despite a year of challenges, we haven't just survived, but come out stronger. Everyone has played their part and we have continued to provide essential support for the vulnerable women of Luton and Central Bedfordshire throughout the year, with no gap in service provision. We have responded to the needs of our clients, embraced technology with virtual programmes and developed new relationships with local and national supporters for the benefit of our clients. I never dreamt that we'd still be living under the restrictions of the pandemic into 2021, but as we slowly and cautiously start to see friends, family, clients and colleagues again, I am reminded of how important that contact is; we are looking forward to welcoming more people back into the office in the coming weeks. But with adaptations over the last year and the need to be creative, we have learnt we can be more flexible with our support and I am excited by how we can incorporate virtual support into our future service provision.

Nicky Panton

CEO



From the beginning of the Pandemic the staff at Stepping Stones has provided a continuity of support for service users. Although for a long period the offices were closed the practitioners continued to provide telephone support to the growing number of clients who were experiencing more challenging lives due to the pandemic and an extended lockdown. Our nursery provision was also affected and providing support to our youngest service users proved to be a really difficult challenge, but on-line activities and materials were provided for parents to work with their children.

Throughout Nicky and the team have maintained the high levels of commitment to service users and demonstrated a professional approach to providing this support in these very challenging times. professionalism they previously demonstrated.

Stepping Stones is slowly opening up the next challenge will be to continue to develop this blended provision of on-line and face to face support. The nursery has welcomed back children and their parents for a range of socially distance activities. Safety for both staff and service users along with the conditions imposed by the coronavirus and extra cleaning regimes will continue to affect how the service can operate and numbers allowed in the building will continue to be tightly controlled.

During this very difficult time we have been supported by our Patron, Meryl Dolling and the ladies of the Inner Wheel who have continually raised funds on behalf of the charity.

We are both grateful and fortunate to have such as supportive Patron.

Finally, many thanks from the Board of Trustees to Nicky and her team for the continued efforts they have put in to making the work of Stepping Stones the vital support it is to our many clients.

Sandra Brown

CHAIR OF TRUSTEES



LOCAL ISSUES

Luton is a diverse and multi-cultural town with around 130 languages spoken. Its population has grown by 13% since 2000 to 214,100. It is home to over 7000 businesses (120 employing 50 or more staff). It is incredibly well connected both to Europe and the rest of the UK, in particular London.

However, big challenges remain. Luton is the 59th most deprived Local Authority with more than 40% households living in relative poverty in some of the town's most deprived wards.

- 46% children living in poverty – second highest rate outside of London
 - 26% working families living in relative poverty
 - 90% of Children's Social Care services are linked to domestic abuse, substance misuse or mental health.
- Labour market figures (Nomis 2020) show us that in Luton, the unemployment rate for women is double that of East of England, sitting at 5.9%.



IMPACT OF COVID ON LUTON

Covid-19 has had a significant impact on Luton, and its women in particular. With revenue from the local airport significantly reduced, Luton Council has had to drastically reduce its support for parents, including the closure of many of its Children's Centres. Their support will now be targeted to those families in most need. We anticipate that this will increase demand for our services and resources and will be closely monitoring emerging needs to make sure we respond effectively.

OUR COVID YEAR



With our refocused objectives, below is a snapshot of just some of our activities over the Covid year.



One to one support delivered over the phone and online



Group programmes, Freedom and Own My Life delivered online



Developed new mental health programme "Serenity" to help manage stress and anxiety



Suite of children's arts, crafts, song and play videos created on our website



Online counselling for 28 women



Emergency food and toiletries deliveries made across Luton and Central Beds



Tablets secured through the "We are Digital" scheme for our digitally excluded women



Gifts/food delivered at Christmas, Mothers Day and Easter along with other items including mindfulness colouring books and friendship bags

OUR PURPOSE AND PRIORITIES

Vision

As a direct result of our work we will have built stronger communities, by putting systems in place that enable women to thrive and be their best selves.

Our Purpose

To equip women who have suffered abuse or are vulnerable due to substance misuse, with the skills, hope and resources they need to make positive life changes.

Our 2020 Objectives

In 2020, to respond to the Covid outbreak, we revised our objectives to meet arising needs and keep the charity focused. These were:

- To provide effective phone and digital support to our existing (and new) clients ensuring they can access tailored emotional and practical support whilst our office remains closed and where possible help them access essential provisions, whilst prioritising the safety of all.
- To safeguard the health and wellbeing of our team.
- To link in with partner agencies including where we can raise and resolve emerging issues, impacting on the health and wellbeing of our clients.

OUR SERVICES AND SUPPORT



Our Services - user led

Our services and programme of support has been designed and shaped by our experts - the women who use our service and our Practitioners - in direct response to need. We deliver our support in a trauma-informed way; without judgement and in collaboration.

We provide:

- One to one support
- Advocacy
- Group support programmes (Freedom Own my Life, Trauma and Anger)
- Free childcare & parenting support
- Employment, training & education
- Counselling
- Legal advice
- Peer support
- Internet access
- Access to donated food and clothing



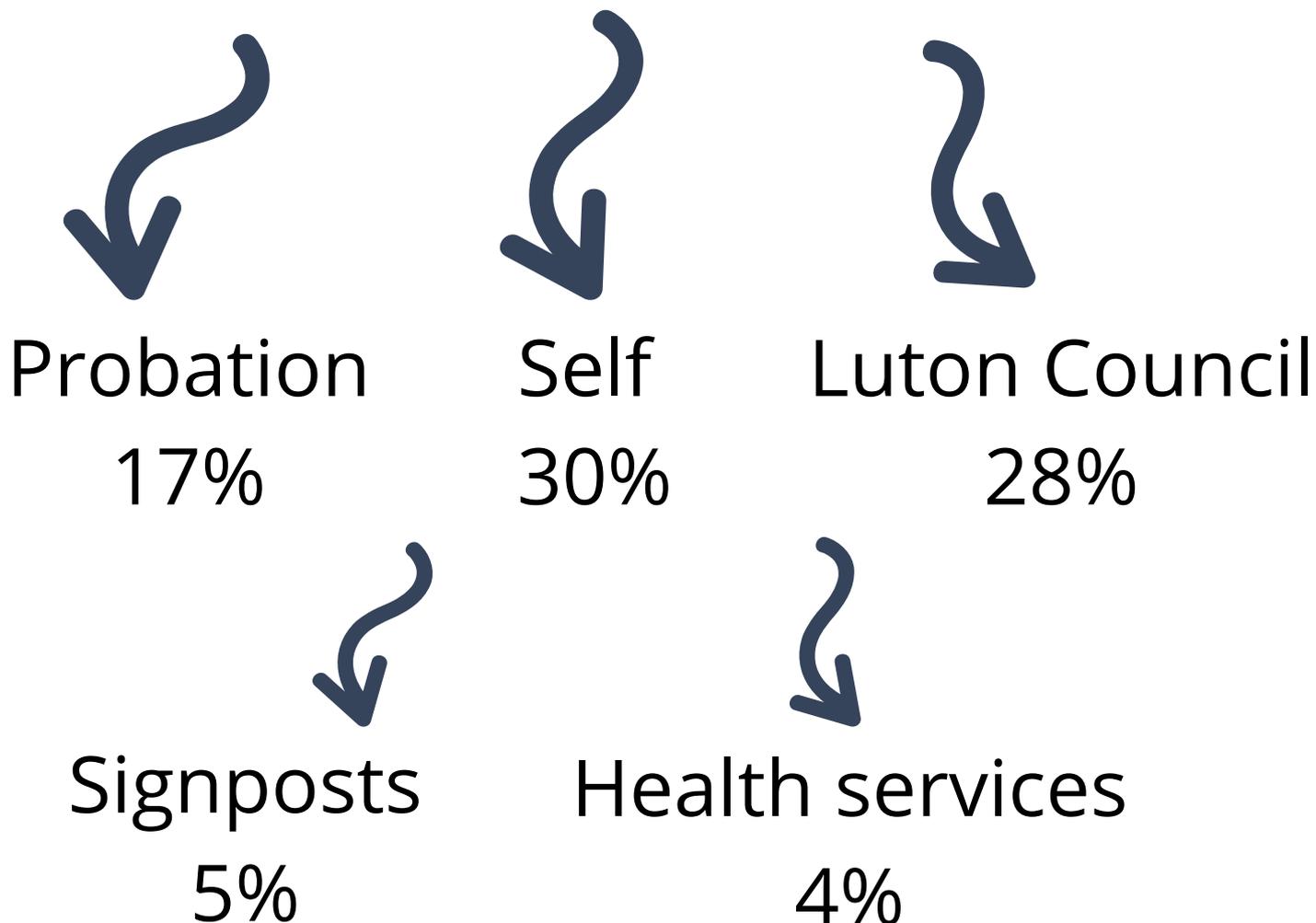
And above all else, we provide safety, a friendly welcome and a listening ear.

REFERRALS



We have experienced real peaks and troughs in referrals this year. By September 2020 we had a significant waiting list as we supported women for longer periods of time (particularly where we could see a deterioration in mental health). Happily, waiting times for the service are now much shorter.

278 referrals received



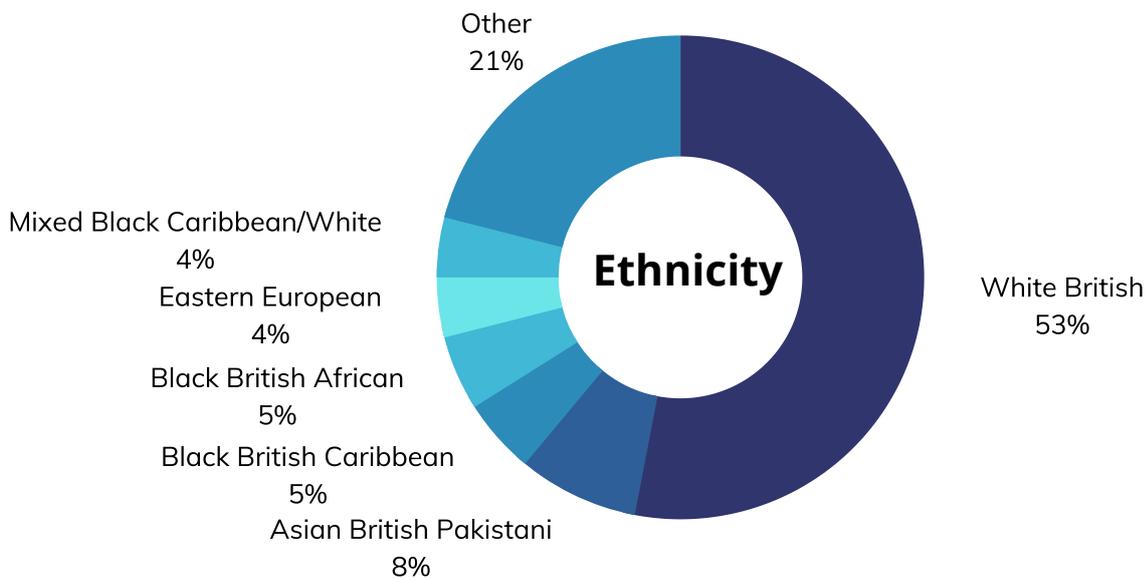
301 WOMEN SUPPORTED



85% experienced domestic abuse



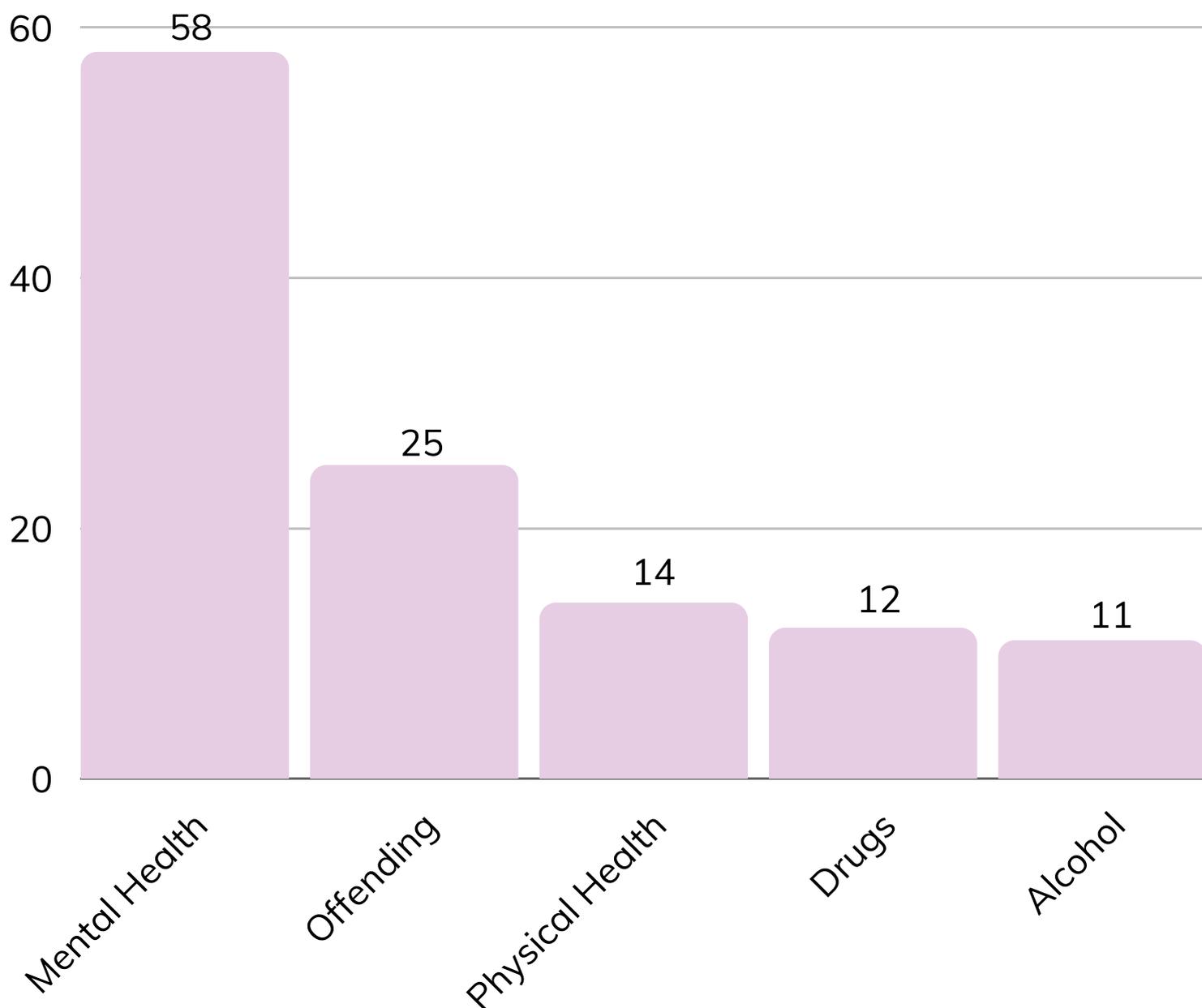
80% aged 21-45 years
5% aged over 55 years



Key Service User Stats

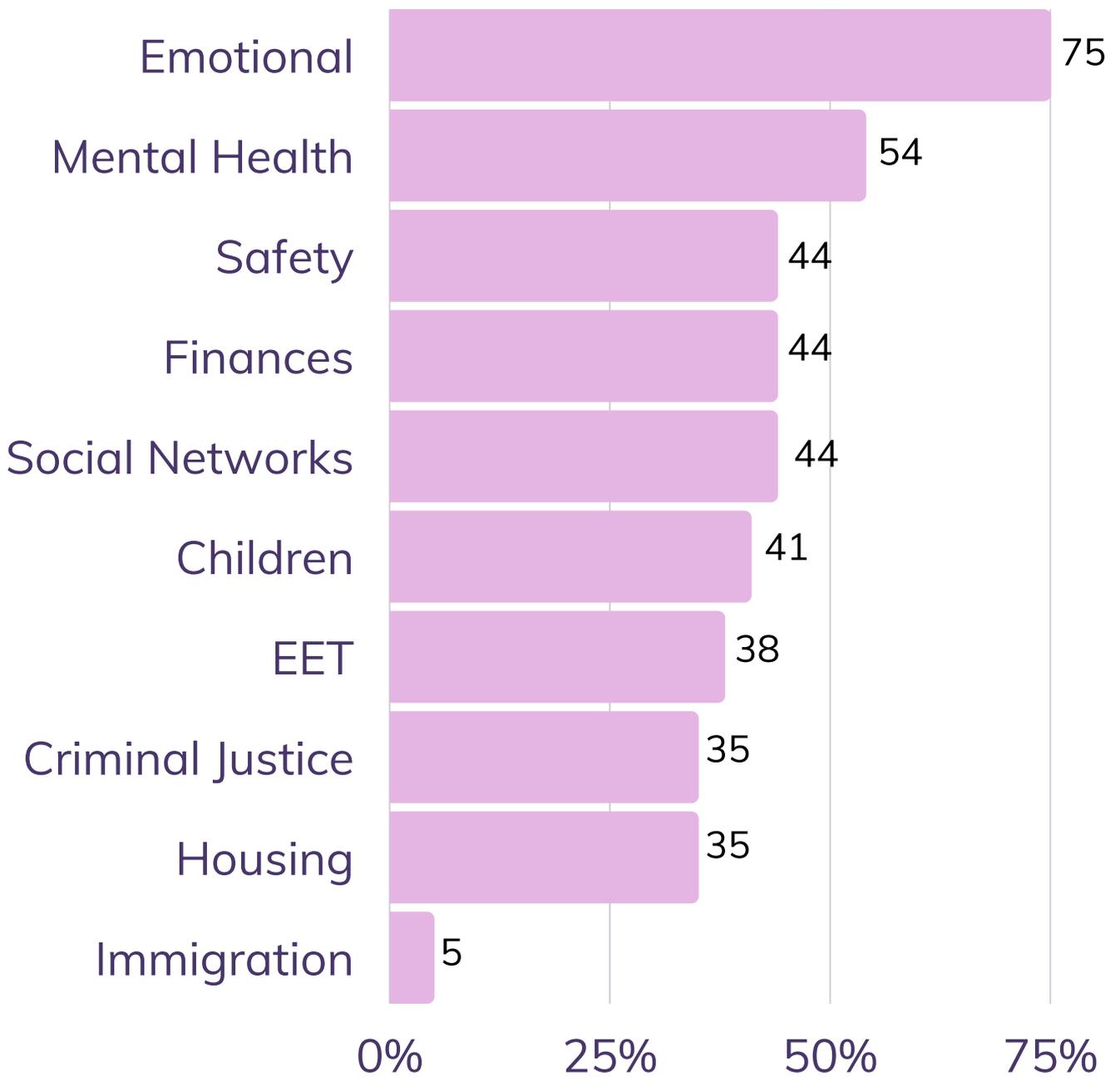
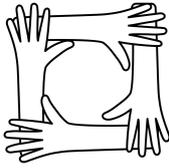
- 42% had a disability (10% have more than 1)
- 56% were unemployed
- 58% single/separated/divorced
- 54% had children

IDENTIFIED VULNERABILITIES



- 35% of service users have more than one vulnerability.

SUPPORT NEEDS



EMERGING NEEDS THROUGH COVID



Covid-19 has had a devastating impact on the lives of the women we support; in many cases intensifying the challenges they already faced. Direct feedback from service users and our practitioners has highlighted some specific needs that have emerged or become more severe through the Covid pandemic. These include:

ISOLATION & MENTAL HEALTH



Women have become more isolated with their already limited support networks further contracted. In turn, this has had a detrimental impact on their emotional and mental health; particularly those women with young children. For those women involved in statutory services such as social care or the Family Courts; they have found it harder to engage and seek consistent help. In many cases, they have struggled to cope with intrusion of these services into their home (safe)space as they have had to attend meetings online; often with their children present.

HOUSEHOLD FINANCES



Covid-19 has limited their ability to work as there has been a necessity to home school and undertake caring responsibilities. As household budgets have become more strained, the women have had to make difficult decisions about essentials—for example prioritising food and utilities above digital data. And again, this has led to further isolation and rising anxieties as they are unable to access online provision (a particular issue for women with children).

ACCESSING SERVICES

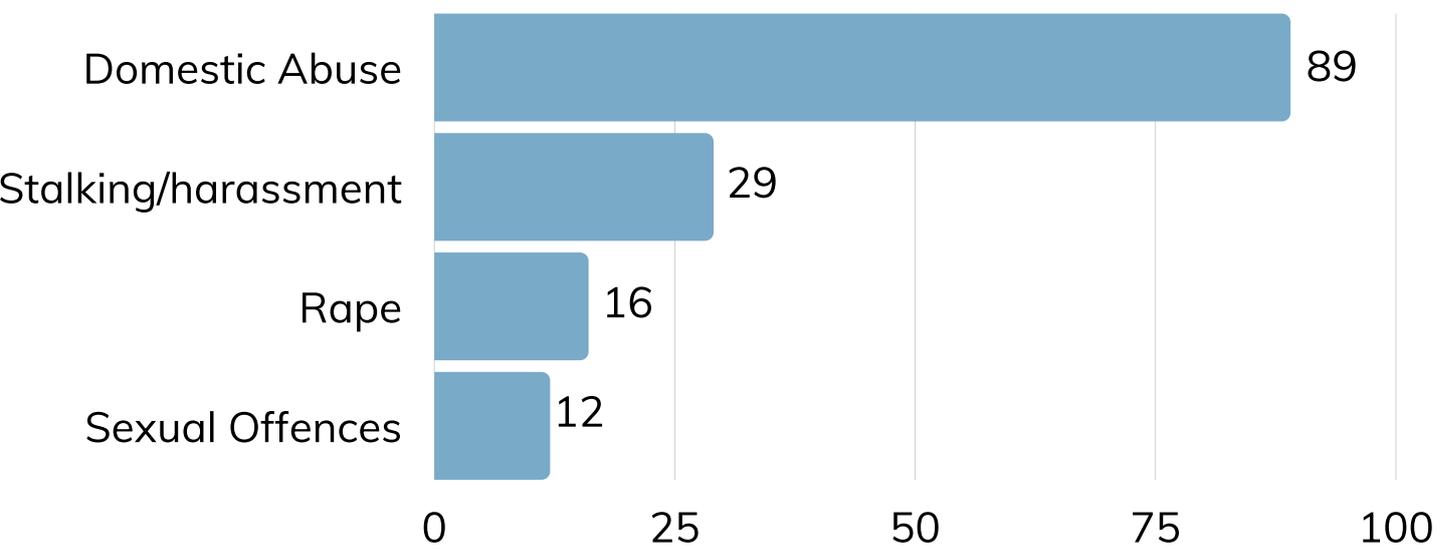


With staff working from home, accessing local services and statutory support has been difficult. Women have experienced delays in getting help around housing, social care, health and criminal justice services in particular and again, this has added to anxieties and feelings of isolation and helplessness.

ABUSE PROFILE

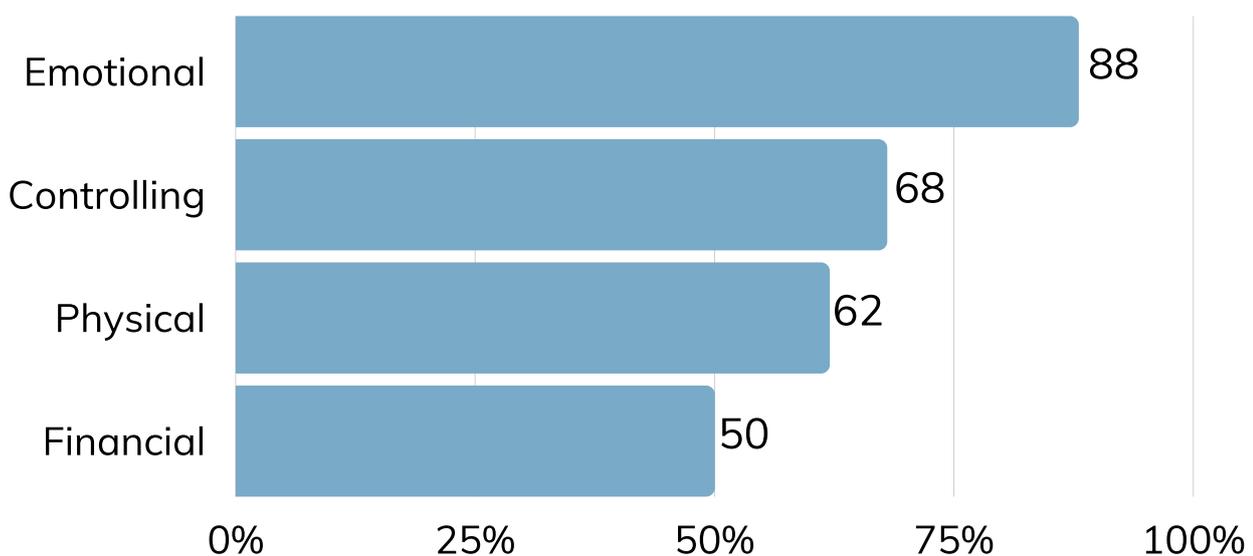


Types of VAWG experienced

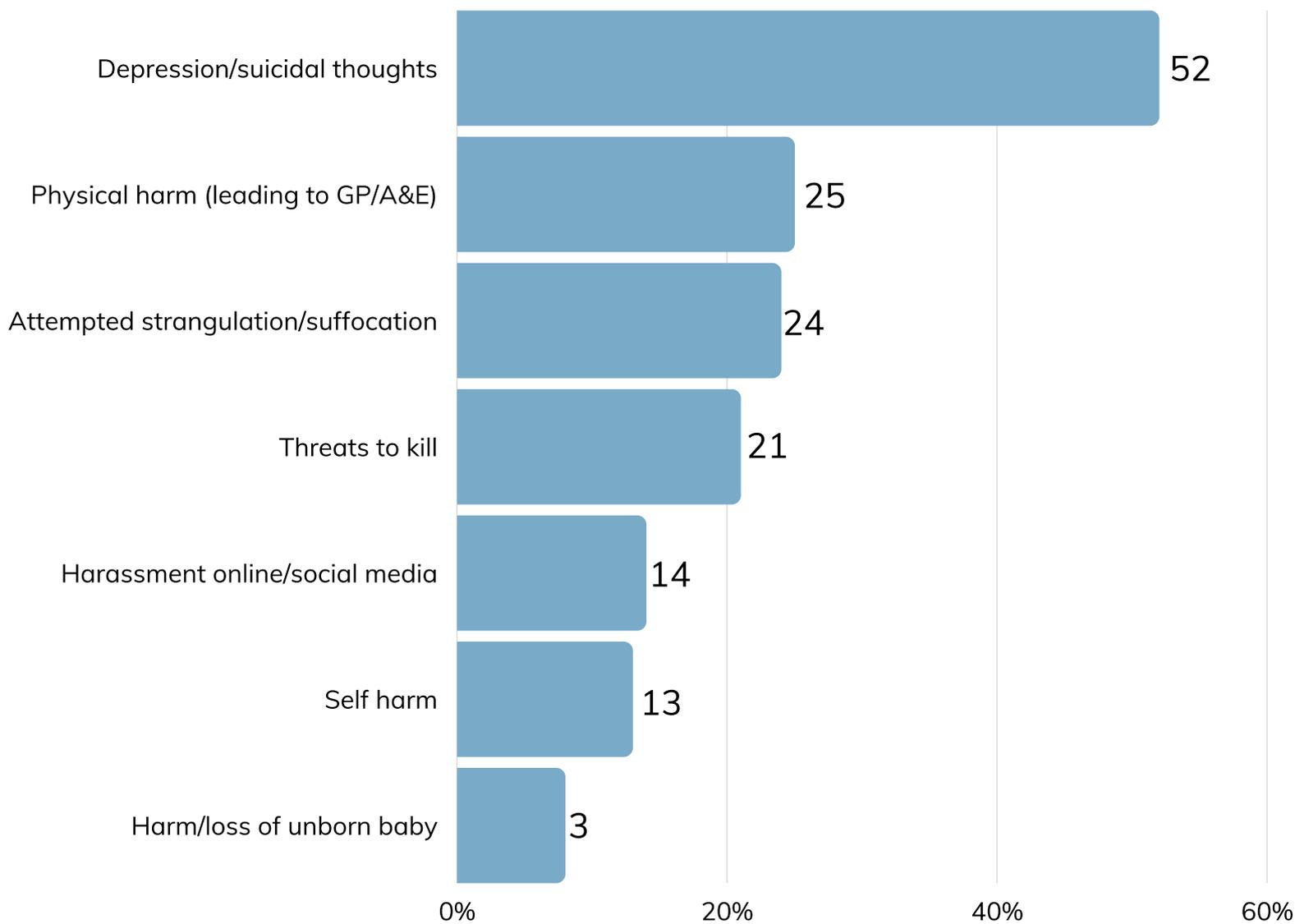


- Length of abuse experienced by a woman at Stepping Stones is on average 6 years
- 25% of women at Stepping Stones experienced or witnessed abuse as a child

Types of Abuse experienced



ABUSE EXPERIENCES



Experiences of abuse are wide ranging but for over half of women who have experienced abuse, it has caused depression or suicidal thoughts.

HELPING CHILDREN



2020 was an incredibly challenging year for our childcare team. But, while the doors were closed for much of the year, the team continued to link in with and support the children of our mums by producing a whole library of videos covering:

- story time
- poetry
- science experiments
- arts and crafts
- cooking
- songs
- games and play



The team also developed and sent out craft and activity packs throughout the year, including packs from the British Library.

Looking forward, we are really positive about 2021, we are already back open and delivering a new parenting course bespoke to the needs of our mums and developmental support groups.

"Thank you for giving us a space we can trust enough to leave our children. Monday is the only day I have away from both of my children and it supports my mental health. Because I'm a single mother with very limited support system so no one is ever available to have my children for me so I can either catch up on housework or sleep."

OUR SUCCESSES



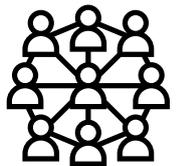
161 positive health outcomes (including women reducing the symptoms of anxiety and trauma and accessing mental health support)

124 positive parenting outcomes (including support through contact processes, increasing confidence in parenting, increasing understanding of DA on children and better relationships with their children)



58 positive justice outcomes (including support through family and criminal courts and help to report to the police)

58 positive social outcomes including improving relationships with family and friends



48 accommodation outcomes including help to find suitable social housing and resettle

46 financial outcomes including help to manage finances and debt



37 ETE outcomes including starting work, training and volunteering

When moving on from Stepping Stones...



- 85% feel able to **make up their own mind** all/most of the time
- 85% feel **more confident** in their **parenting**
- 83% can **deal with their problems well** all/most of the time
- 82% feel **safe** all/most of the time
- 82% feel **confident** all/most of the time
- 81% understand that the abuse was **not their fault**

When moving on from Stepping Stones cont...



- 81% understand more about the **impact of abuse** on their children
- 78% more confident in **asking for help**
- 78% feel more **optimistic** about the future all/most of the time
- 75% **feel good about themselves** all/most of the time
- 74% **feel close to others** all/some of the time
- 69% feel their **support networks have improved**

WHAT WOMEN SAY...

“I am in a different place in my life now and it is thanks to the support I received at Stepping Stones. My keyworker has been amazing from start to finish. I have learnt so much about domestic abuse and it felt so lifting to know that my story was believed after not being heard for what felt like so long.
I am happy now, I am happy with my life and now know that life can be better.”

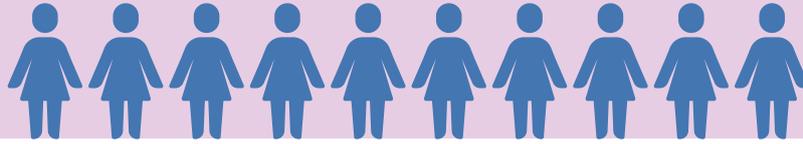
“Stepping Stones is amazing and the staff are incredible women who are truly inspiring.”

“At first I could not talk, I was afraid to tell anyone about myself or what was happening to me. I did not have the confidence to trust anyone. My culture is one of the bad ones because you have to obey your husband even if he is abusing you or taking advantage of you. Many things have now changed since I have been supported by Stepping Stones. Things I did not know before.”

“I can't put into words how amazing and dedicated these women are and how much help, love and care they give to others.”

LIVING OUR VALUES

SAFETY, COLLABORATION, EMPLOYMENT,
INFORMED CHOICE



All women who completed exit feedback forms either agreed or agreed strongly that ...

- Coming to the service has made a **positive difference** to their lives
- their **privacy** was **respected**
- they were **listened** to and **believed** by staff
- they were **supported** to make their **own choices**
- they were **supported to talk** about their experiences of violence and abuse
- they would **come back** to the service if they needed to
- they would **recommend** the service to family and friends
- staff were **knowledgeable and competent**
- the service was **non judgemental**
- the service met their needs **effectively**
- the service **understood** and **respected** my needs

After being supported at Stepping Stones, all women who responded feel....

- **better about themselves**
- **more confident**
- **they know more about domestic abuse**
- **more confident to ask for help when they need it**

RAFIA'S STORY



Background

Rafia lived in Luton with her husband having only arrived in the UK from Pakistan in 2017. Her three children (aged 14, 12, 11) lived in the family home. They have been living with them since October 2019, having arrived from Pakistan. Also living in the home was her husband's daughter from a previous marriage (aged 10).

The children were on a child protection plan under the category of emotional abuse. Concerns were raised by the children about domestic abuse. Rafia was unclear about her immigration status and recourse to public funds.

There were concerns that Rafia was in an abusive and controlling relationship. She reported to be anxious, scared and walking on eggshells. Rafia was often in bed unwell and seemed unable to cope. The children were often cooking and one burnt herself.

She was on medication for depression but was not consistently taking this with reports that her husband prevented her from taking this medication. She recently had a miscarriage and he blamed her for this.

The children reported that she was suicidal and concerned for her mental health. There had been a previous incident where he was kicking in a door. A lot of abuse appears to be coercive control and emotional. Rafia reported that he often ignored her and refused to speak to her.

Her husband wanted to send her children back to Pakistan and she was very worried about this.

Our Help and outcomes

Rafia was in need of some immediate confidential one-to-one support. The children were at risk in the home of further emotional abuse if they continued to witness the abuse. Her emotional wellbeing was in decline with the pressures and ongoing abuse in the home.

After undertaking an initial needs assessment, our Practitioner began to provide weekly one to one emotional and practical support over the phone. She supported Rafia to leave her husband and move to safe accommodation; first to a hotel and then out of area. Our Practitioner linked her to another women's charity in the new area who helped her to furnish a privately rented home.

At the same time, we also helped her to source and understand legal advice regarding her immigration status. Our Practitioner continued to speak to Rafia weekly and realised that she was suffering from increased isolation in her new home and this came to a head around Christmas. We provided some Christmas gifts for her children.

Again, our Practitioner supported her to move back to Luton so that her children could be near to existing friends and school. We are helping her to re-establish support from social services and ensuring she is financially able to live independently – giving help to claim benefits and find work. Her immigration status is now finalised.

SUPPORTING THE SECTOR

Over the past year we have developed our social media networks to share service information with our service users and also better interact with our supporter base. We have used our platforms to join campaigns around women's issues and to show our support for the small charity sector more generally. Here is just a snapshot of some of these campaigns.



LOOKING AHEAD...



While proceeding with caution and closely following Government guidelines, we are very excited that we are starting a gradual reopening of our Luton hub. It is our full intention to return to a full office programme of one to one and groups ; with some phone and online support as needed.

We also have plans to broaden our provision and to continue to enhance our existing services. These include...

- Health and wellbeing (exercise, cooking ..)
- Roll out of our "Serenity" programme focusing on stress/anxiety management
- Implementation of a new Probation contract to deliver community based women's services under the stewardship of Advance.
- Development of a new programme of peer mentor support
- Implementing a new bespoke parenting programme focusing on the needs of the women we support
- Practitioner accreditation through a Women's Aid domestic abuse qualification
- Gaining the Women's Aid quality standards level 1 accreditation
- Supporting the implementation of the Domestic Abuse Bill across Luton and Central Bedfordshire.

SUPPORT US & KEEP IN TOUCH



The true impact of Covid-19 and subsequent lockdowns is only just beginning to be felt. In this new financial year, we are already starting to see our referral numbers rise again as statutory services begin to work through their backlog of cases.

The level of need amongst the most vulnerable women and their children across Luton is as high as we have ever experienced as a charity but at the same time; access to specialist support services has become more challenging.

There are many ways you can easily donate (without even noticing!), including:

Through your shopping



Or make a donation through Local Giving.

And there are many ways you can stay in touch with our latest news ...



SPECIAL THANKS TO...

There are so many people and organisations to thank for supporting our work over the past year. We really couldn't do it without you and the whole team remains incredibly grateful to you all.



Bedfordshire & Luton Community Foundation



The Pilgrim Trust