Impact Report 2020/21

Women's Counselling and Therapy Service

We imagine a world where all women and girls enjoy good mental health and flourish



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A welcome from our Chair

In a year of extraordinary challenges for the women and girls we work with, Women's Counselling and Therapy Service (WCTS) has adapted and found new ways to work. Trustees kept a focus on guiding and learning from these experiences in order to inform how we respond to meeting need.

We know that great challenges have also been faced by our partners across the city of Leeds and our staff team. I can't do justice here to the enormity of this, or the remarkable responses we have seen from our partners and communities.

Our new delivery partnership for NHS-funded services has been tested and shown to thrive, while our work with the Ministry of Justice has evolved and expanded. We continue to be supported by funders of all sizes, and they have responded positively to our approach and flexibility throughout. We have found new modes of delivery too, including support in preparing for birth in a pandemic. Each of these is just one of the ever-stronger foundations underpinning our services as we reintroduce face-to-face work over the coming months.

I am proud of the work we have done, inspired by our team and excited about the future we are building to meet the needs of women and girls.

Liane Langdon
Chair





"I didn't like the thought of telephone counselling at all, but I'm surprised at how well it's worked"

Chief Executive's report

I am incredibly proud of our staff's tireless work, despite the challenges and ongoing uncertainties of the pandemic. Our committed trustees have steered with foresight, making excellent decisions that have enabled the Service to respond quickly in supporting staff in delivering counselling remotely. All of this aided by the backing, encouragement and flexibility of our existing funders and Covid-specific funds.

With its disproportionate impact on women and girls, particularly those already experiencing marginalisation and deprivation, this year has shown us just how vital specialised support is. With its deep understanding of intersectional disadvantage, our social justice perspective and trauma-specialised holistic approach the Service is equipped to support those with complex histories and needs.

Our commitment to reach more women and girls is re-energised. Entering our 40th year and developing a 10-year plan, we aim to further explore a long-term video counselling offer. Women and girls have told us that remote support has its benefits, and time will give us information about whether remote sessions provide the changes and life improvements achieved through face-to-face support.

We continue to look at how we can best focus our limited resources, address barriers to accessing our Service and reach even more BAME women and girls in Leeds. Despite a uniquely challenging backdrop these are exciting times for our Service, and I'm as confident about our future impact was I am proud of our recent achievements.

Tessa Denham
Chief Executive



A challenging but transformative period

The pandemic revealed the incredible resilience and adaptability of WCTS and the women who access our services, even though their predicaments were exacerbated by it and will be for years to come. Although it's taking more therapeutic sessions to achieve than previously, we're still reducing women's psychological distress and mental health problems with a more holistic approach, which in turn is delivering sustainable positive outcomes.

Transforming futures

319

women and girls were helped by us this year.
Down 25% on the previous five years' average, although their time in the Service increased on average from six to eight months.

Engaging with BAME

32%

of women and girls we helped are from BAME communities in Leeds.
Our success at engaging with these groups as part of our wider commitment to inclusivity has been demonstrated.

Real change

70%

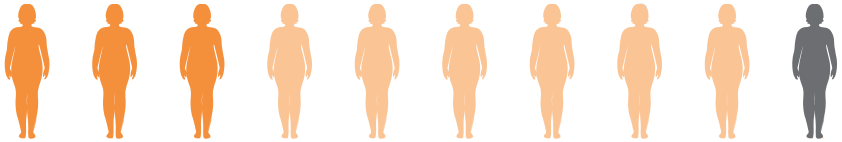
of women and girls leave our counselling "recovered or with statistically significant improvements" after six sessions or more.

Supporting families

2/3

of our clients are mothers, with over half having responsibility for children under 16, and 5% having had children removed into care.

Meeting complex needs



Nine out of ten of our clients presented with highly 'complex' needs (more than one issue or difficulty affecting mental, physical, emotional, social or financial health or wellbeing).

Six out of those nine were suffering from at least five problems, including the effects of trauma, rape, abuse, domestic violence, neglect as a child, or anxiety, most of these severely impacting over many years.

Addressing poverty

100% of the women we worked with were on low incomes or in poverty (DWP definitions).

60% were long-term unemployed, and half of these on incapacity or sickness benefits.

In short: we're reaching the women who need us most.

Holistic approach — all-round improvements

- 80% of clients feel that they understand themselves better
- 78% feel that they've been coping better with their feelings
- 80% feel that their relationships with others have improved
- 80% feel that they look after themselves better
- 80% feel that they can tackle difficult situations better



"I have really enjoyed my time using the Service. It has helped me come out of a dark place"

The impact of Covid on women's and girls' lives

A survey in 2020[1] gave us worrying but invaluable insights into the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women and girls in Leeds, particularly BAME women. Negative impacts included women in keyworker roles with inadequate protection, school closures affecting job security, severe financial instability, the emotional burden of "holding it all together", and the increased risk of domestic violence. Women were deeply concerned about a backwards movement in terms of gender inequality. It was also clear that those women hardest hit by austerity[2] are most likely to be affected by the pandemic. The UK now has around 5 million children living in poverty, of which 46% are BAME children.

This year, research from Agenda[3] revealed a "deeply concerning increase in poverty and destitution and a growing future crisis in women and girls' mental health". The experiences of 150 community organisations highlighted mental health problems worsening, an increasing complexity of need, and the deep and demonstrable connection between financial problems and mental health.

Alarmingly, 85% of surveyed organisations think the pandemic will cause long-term mental health problems for women and girls, creating further strain for already overstretched statutory mental health services[4]. With the risk of a "lost generation", WCTS fully supports Agenda's call for a social recovery strategy to prevent further long-term damage to the most vulnerable women and girls.

Footnotes

1. Women's Lives Leeds, Covid-19 Survey 01/06/20 – 14/06/2020
2. Women's Budget Group, The Impact of Austerity on Women in the UK
3. Agenda, Voices from Lockdown: A Way Forward for Women and Girls
4. Women's Health Strategy Consultation Response: Agenda and Mind 2021

The Visible Project

WCTS continues to host Visible: the pioneering city-wide project aimed at improving health and wellbeing outcomes for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse (CSA). A new funding agreement with Leeds NHS Clinical Commissioning Group has enabled Visible to recruit its first Director.

Richard Barber is tasked with supporting this work across the city, initially focusing on encouraging organisations to embed the Visible Policy Statement **visibleproject.org.uk**.

Stakeholders from the Strategic Steering Group reviewed key priorities, supported by the Expert Leadership Reference Group of adult survivors of CSA. These included ensuring that services, organisations and employers can meet the needs of anyone disclosing a past experience of CSA. A central aspect of this is promoting further uptake of the Visible Policy Statement and accompanying resource pack, which together guide organisations towards greater confidence around supporting people with a CSA history.

"I was delighted and humbled to be recruited to the post of Visible Director. Survivors of childhood sexual abuse often don't get their needs met, or even properly recognised, so the work is urgent. Visible has already brought together a wide-ranging network of professionals and survivors in Leeds. With these foundations in place, we are looking to put a long-term strategy in place to offer something transformative for CSA survivors."



Richard Barber
Visible Director

The value of nurturing and embedding lived experience

Experiencing first-hand the extraordinary work provided by the WCTS led me to volunteering as a trustee. It was also an opportunity to understand how a charity is run and, importantly as an ex-Service user, be able to contribute to the success of an organisation through my lived experience.

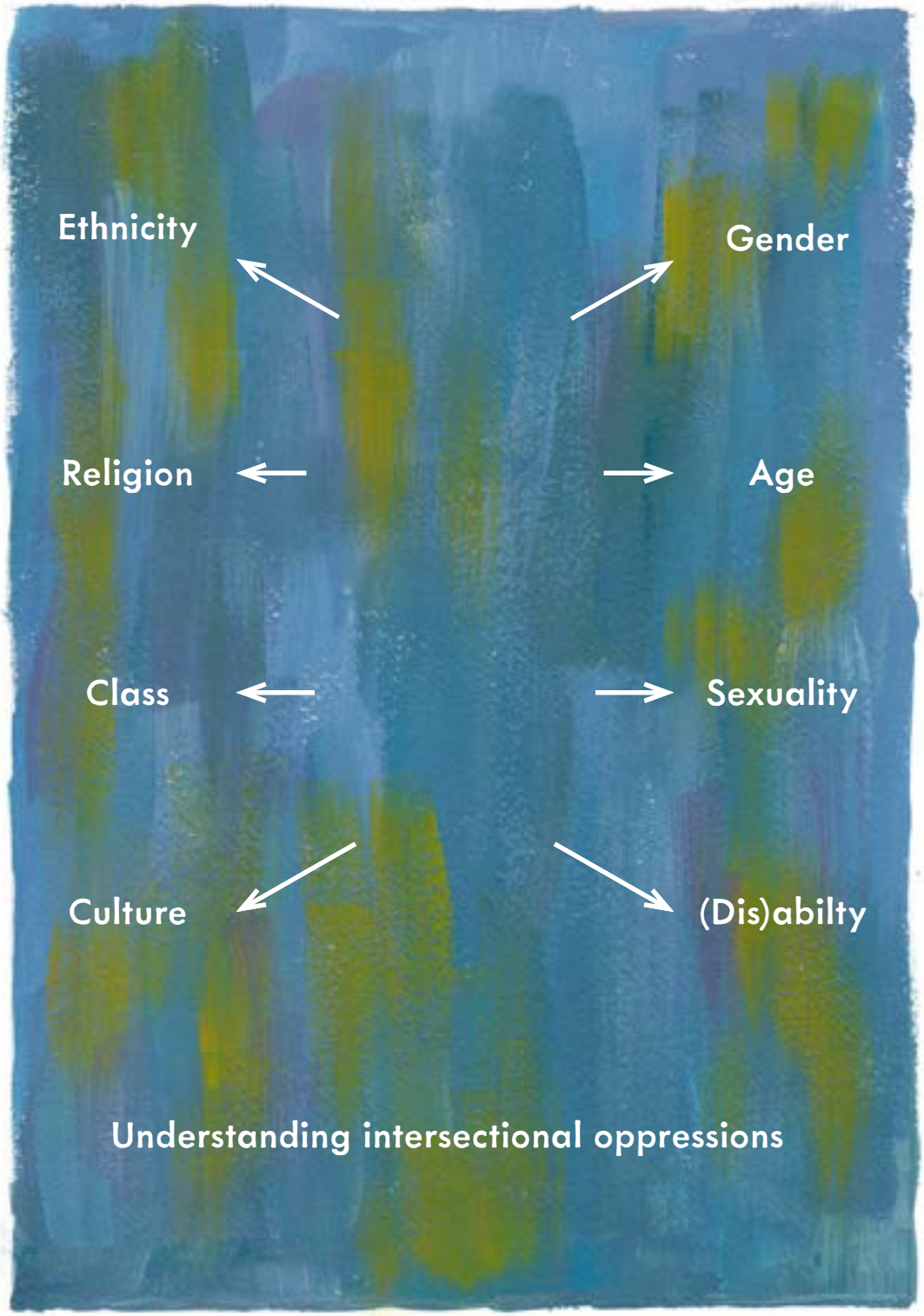
WCTS is a lifeline for those who need support, especially critical at a time when NHS waiting lists are at an all-time high. I enjoy working with passionate women who freely give their time to help an organisation thrive and expand. It has been over a year since becoming a trustee and, after some leadership training, I have learned so much.

Since the pandemic began it has been an incredibly stressful time and, for the trustees, has meant many challenges. Working from home hasn't been easy, but the team have prioritised the needs of our most vulnerable Service users and kept them safe.

Importantly, as a black woman, I have the opportunity to help drive WCTS's vision of racial equality that underpins all areas of work. I am incredibly proud to be part of an organisation that improves the lives of women across our region and will continue to support WCTS for many years to come. It is an honour to be able to contribute.



Andrea Bucknor
Trustee and
ex-Service user



Growing an anti-racism service

We hope the tragic deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor — as well as many others before and since — mark a turning point in the global North's relationship with racism, racial trauma and injustice. At WCTS, we're actively taking steps to face the challenge of reflecting upon our individual and organisational parts in oppression.

Over the past year we've held monthly staff discussions, implementing focused training on unconscious bias, privilege, diversity and intersectionality. Staff now have the opportunity to come together in a race and diversity peer support group, and we've commissioned an organisation, Words of Colour, to facilitate an audit of our practice and a re-visioning exercise as we go into our 40th year of service next year.

This work has sometimes been deeply painful and uncomfortable, but also collaborative and inspirational. We know each other better now and, at times, find it harder to bear the pain of the experiences colleagues share. This progress has helped us look at how our work can better support women dealing with racism and its impacts, and all forms of discrimination. It is enabling us to work better as a team and also together with our partners in addressing racist behaviour.

Importantly, the work is encouraging us to be more explicit about centring the Service within a social justice perspective by directly acknowledging factors like poverty, discrimination and exclusion. These are some of the factors our clients often face, and which we can link to their wellbeing and the mental health problems they are experiencing.

What we do

The values at the heart of the Service:

Strengthening, empowering
We strive to offer relationships that strengthen and empower; we support individual autonomy.

Women and girls centred
We focus on working with women and girls because of deep and persistent gender inequalities; we are informed and shaped by the views of women and girls who use the Service.

Diversity minded
We work to be holistic, accessible and responsive; we develop innovative and sensitive solutions appropriate to need.

Safe, thoughtful, kind
We seek to be attentive, attuned and connected; we listen carefully and respectfully.

Unique
We are the specialist women's and girls' mental health charity in Leeds, with expertise in understanding their experiences, psychological issues and dilemmas.

We offer services for up to two years within a commitment to long-term work believing that long-term work is needed to overcome multiple traumatic experiences and entrenched difficulties.

Central to the Service is our relational approach: seeing each woman as a unique individual, listening to and understanding her experiences and building trust in a psychotherapeutic relationship.

Our approach

"Being loaned a tablet unlocked and lifted my isolation. It made me aware that I am capable of connecting digitally and an awareness that I am loved and cared for"

Adaptive
In our complex, rapidly changing and unpredictable work we take an 'adaptive' approach, allowing us to move forward with both flexibility and focus. We also respond creatively to opportunity and adversity. Above all, we learn from our actions and act on our learning.

Innovative
We collaborate with others to develop and test new ideas and practices, pursuing long-term goals and innovating, where necessary, to reach them.

Interdependence
We believe every part is connected to the whole, and we work closely with other practitioners to provide a holistic programme of therapy and care.

How our Service works

Our expertise

- Qualified experienced practitioners
- Therapists have, on average, over 10 years' experience with this client group
- Culturally appropriate, kind, rigorous, personalised, flexible services
- Commitment to continuing professional development

Determined women and girls improving their lives despite multiple disadvantages and challenges

Evidence-based practice

- Proven therapeutic modules
- Deep understanding of intersectional and psychological issues through research and application of theory
- Working with partners to ensure access to holistic responses to needs
- Constant evaluation and learning

Our service elements

Opportunities for reparative relationships promoting healing and recovery

- **Counselling** for stabilisation and resilience, better understanding of how we think and act, building internal strength and safety
- **Case work** for practical issues impinging on therapy: domestic abuse-related housing, benefits, accessing wider health services, legal advice, parenting and schools, etc.
- **Community provision** in deprived areas in Leeds reaching isolated and marginalised communities of women and girls
- **Psychotherapy** to understand the ongoing impacts of formative years and of traumatic experiences, and to increase our access to who we are, especially our strengths and what makes our hearts sing
- **Improving access** by supporting the professional development of newly qualified BAME counsellors

Improved mental health and wellbeing

Better resilience — responding well to life's setbacks

Healthier choices

Increased self-confidence, self-esteem and self-care

Effective, loving parenting

More positive thoughts, feelings, understandings

Safer lives

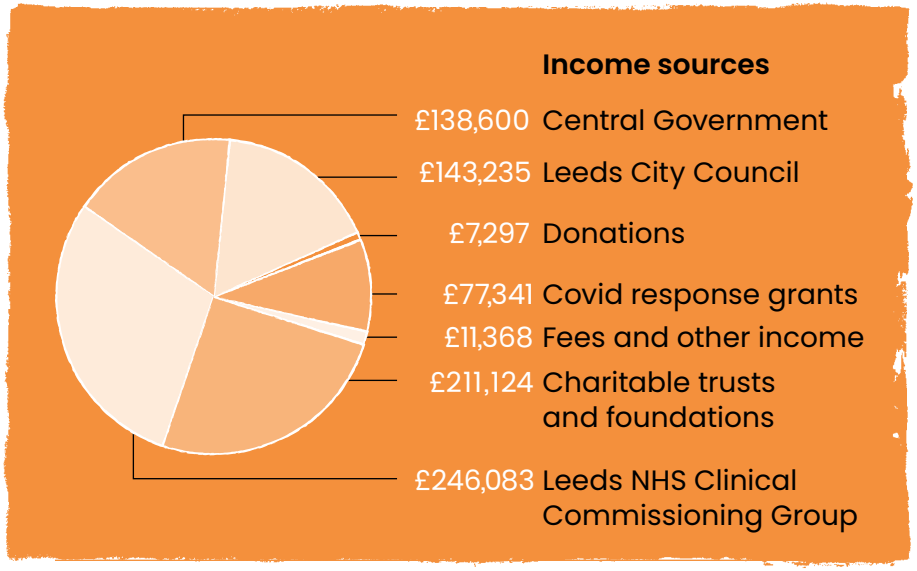
Realising potential

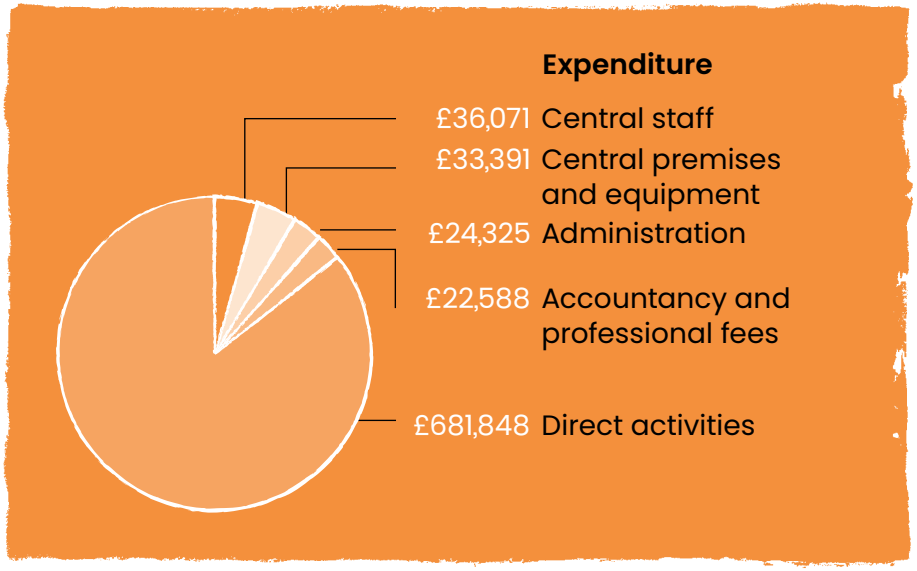
Achieving goals

Healthy relationships

Funding sources and expenditure

The Service is fortunate to have a diverse funding base through the support of committed and enlightened funders.





With thanks

Thank you to all our funding and delivery partners. We could not reach the women and girls we serve without your support and encouragement. Covid has tested these relationships; we believe we are emerging strengthened with more flexibility and creativity in our work together.

Partner organisations

- Basis Yorkshire
- Together Women Project
- Hamara Centre
- Asha Neighbourhood Centre
- Bangladeshi Centre Leeds
- Leeds City College
- Oakwood Lane Medical Practice
- Westfield Medical Centre
- Stocks Hill Hub
- Middleton Health Centre
- Bramley Children's Centre
- Armley One Stop Centre

Thank you to all of our partners in:

WOMEN'S LIVES LEEDS
Empowering Women and Girls in Leeds

Funders

Leeds City Council

BBC Children in Need

The Bromley Trust

NHS

Comic Relief

The Pilgrim Trust

Ministry of Justice

Garfield Weston Foundation

Community Fund

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Thank you to our talented and passionate trustees and staff — all pillars of strength in WCTS' work.

Staff team

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