



Recovery is prevention
**Challenging
Domestic Abuse
& Saving Lives**

Impact Report 2022/2023

Challenging Domestic Abuse, Changing Lives

Registered Charity 1159445

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“From the moment (my VOICES support worker) stepped into our lives everything changed. Having somebody who advocates for us and who listens and actually hears what I am saying is invaluable. Knowing there is somebody who has your back means you can take those risks; you can risk opening up; you can risk speaking about things that happened; you can risk asking for help and support; you can risk trusting somebody again.”

Introduction by Ursula Lindenberg, CEO of VOICES

“A Patchwork of Provision’, the report into a national mapping exercise published by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner’s Office in early 2023, reported that **counselling and therapeutic work was the service most wanted by survivors, yet the least likely to be funded** as part of the statutory response to the pandemic that is domestic abuse.

The money tells a story - that recovery is undervalued and ignored in the current model of crisis-led support. Independent Domestic Violence Advocacy work was never intended to be solely a crisis model, but part of a whole picture of support that involves e.g. justice, health and social care working in a joined up way to prevent domestic abuse and violence. This doesn’t happen for the vast majority of people who are grappling with services that look at each component of a complex situation in isolation. We must acknowledge that “risk-led” (based on experience of what risk indicators are and awareness of trauma) is not the same as “crisis-led” (reactive rather than responsive; short-term rather than sustainable). Funding has in fact created an “A&E model” of Domestic Abuse support. Comparatively few resources go towards prevention (e.g. education/training for individuals and organisations, early support where risks are less prominent/ understood) and rehabilitation (e.g. group work, individual support, perpetrator work). People who face additional barriers to getting help, through minoritization, age, disability, religion, language or migrant status, for example, are the least well served by narrow criteria for accessing specialist help. Stigma, shame and prejudice about who is “vulnerable” or who might be a perpetrator of abuse all shape an area of work that is challenging, and in which experience and specialist knowledge are invaluable yet undervalued. VOICES stands for a holistic approach, like the preventive and whole health model that is most effective for health & wellbeing.

This picture reflects what VOICES grew out of, the lack of services around recovery and empowerment that was evident 10 years ago and now even more under-resourced due to a combination of economic austerity, COVID impacts, a cost-of-living crisis. and the intended or unintended consequences of benefits regimes. And the profound impact on mental health of Domestic Abuse, together with the clear wish from people to have support that is poorly understood or resourced. This makes lived experience feedback into mental health and recovery needs of Domestic Abuse survivors more needed than ever.

Overall, the gap in funding support reflects the visibility of that need: (people are visible when in crisis, not so much when ‘coping’, after separation); It reflects the stigma that suggests that coping is an individual matter, that crisis is the ‘fault’ of people who were 'not ready to accept help', etc; It reflects a hierarchy of needs model that isn't what most people impacted by Domestic Abuse can respond to or access. It shows that group work is undervalued and long-term therapeutic work, that is so essential for recovery from sexual abuse or substance misuse, is seen as a “nice to have” not a necessity for future wellbeing of adults and children.

VOICES aims to reframe Domestic Abuse support on the understanding that “Recovery is Prevention”, with a holistic model of support and empowerment, aspiring to help people recover and thrive, achieve their full potential and be the voices of change, helping create a better system for all. This report shows where we have got to with putting this aim into practice through 2022-23.

We celebrate all those who we have had the privilege of supporting on their journey of recovery, and call on local and national policy makers and the wider community to join us in investing in preventive and recovery support, so that women & girls, and all survivors, are not left to fend for themselves, retraumatised or put at further risk, but are supported in their efforts to live full lives, free from abuse.

About VOICES



VOICES IS:

- **Unique** - a survivor-led charity supporting people with recovery from domestic abuse in Bath and North East Somerset
- **A platform offering opportunities to feed back insights from lived experience to influence policy and provision.**
- **Diverse** - no two people have exactly the same experience of domestic abuse or recovery. We have many voices that, together, can make a difference.

History

VOICES was founded in 2014 by local women with lived experience to support others and to provide a platform for the voices of people with lived experience to be heard by services and policymakers, improving responses to their needs. It is a registered charity (CIO) and a full member of Women's Aid. The charity is unique in offering local people impacted by Domestic Abuse longer term holistic recovery support centering on group work and peer support but also providing individual advocacy and support, counselling, access to a free legal clinic, and lived experience work. VOICES acknowledges the difficulty and stigma faced by victims of domestic abuse but also the different barriers which may be faced by male victims and people in the LGBTQ+ communities. Although our group programmes are currently only available to women, we also provide individual support and signposting for men, Trans and non-binary survivors and those in same-sex relationships.

VOICES has become a centre of excellence for domestic abuse recovery, providing training and consultation that is informed by lived experience and long-term support work. Our model of integrated, accessible and tailored support plays a key role in building stronger relationships in the community; enabling people to fulfil their potential by working to safely address issues at the earliest possible stage, with peer-led and group programmes to combat social isolation and aid reintegration in working and social life. VOICES' integrated support and focus on recovery has proven effective in transforming self-confidence and addressing the root causes of mental health problems associated with Domestic and Sexual Abuse.

VOICES supported 137 individual survivors and victims and their families between April 2022 and end of March 2023, and continues to provide high-quality, effective and bespoke services in the community to support individuals, their families, and the wider community. The charity provides value for money services, not only in terms of the benefit to individual clients, but in terms of the wider benefit to local families and communities, and through improving other service responses (e.g. Talking Therapies, housing or DWP) to domestic abuse. We will continue to develop a unique inclusive space for trauma recovery in Bath, increasing options for partnership with other organisations to benefit local people and their community, and supporting their wellbeing needs.

About our Recovery Centre in Bath

January 2023 marked the first full year since VOICES opened a Recovery centre in Bath for women & girls who have experienced domestic and sexual abuse, a confidential space where people can come to meet with others for peer support and group programmes, to receive individual recovery support and access other services such as counselling or our free legal clinic.

During this first year, the charity consulted with people we work with about how to develop and decorate the space and created a garden space with the pro bono help of an architect and designer. Both the garden and building have been designed with the trauma recovery aims of the charity in mind, to be inclusive, calm and welcoming spaces. VOICES made alterations to make the building accessible, with support from funders including the Bath & North East Somerset Community Infrastructure Levy fund, and Bath Disability Trust.

The Villa has provided space for partnership. In the first year in our new building, we have provided space to 4 therapeutic and empowerment groups, 2 specialist counsellors providing weekly support, a monthly multi-agency practitioner network meeting and women's music therapy and music groups. The space has great potential for further partnerships to support women and girls.



Putting a Trauma-informed approach into practice

Having dedicated space to provide trauma informed services is something that has been proven to increase the benefits of support services for people who have suffered trauma and abuse. VOICES have long subscribed to the principles of trauma informed working and received training in 2018/19 from One Small Thing. Stephanie Covington has led the way in the development of gender responsive approaches to supporting people after and through trauma. VOICES are a member organisation of the South West Trauma Informed Network.

Research has shown that holistic services supporting women are best able to implement trauma informed approaches. The principles of trauma informed working, upon which VOICES bases its holistic approach, are Safety, Trust, Choice, Collaboration and Empowerment.

Five Core Values of Trauma informed Working

Safety: ensuring physical and emotional safety

Trustworthiness: creating respectful environments where personal boundaries are maintained

Choice: creating environments where individuals have choice and control

Collaboration: making decisions with the individual and sharing power

Empowerment: prioritising empowerment and skill building

Harris and Falot, 2009

Safety

Our unique safe space is the physical representation of the emotional space we aim to foster for survivors. A place to be listened to, believed and where recovery is nurtured. This is psychological safety, an antidote to the tactics of coercive control and emotional abuse that have been used by perpetrators.

Trust

VOICES works hard to establish a sense of trust with people who approach us for support. Building and earning trust is something that requires time and an opportunity to question or explore different options for support. This begins with a conversation, and listening to the diverse experiences of people, with an emphasis on person-centred support.

Choice & Transparency

From first contact with the charity, whether through our website or in a phone call, we aim to provide transparency and choice for people who we have the privilege to work with. This means explaining how we work and what we do, and providing as much information as we can about what choices are available for individuals and families dealing with the impacts of domestic & sexual abuse. Informed choice is the basis for support and recovery work at VOICES.

Collaboration

We understand our work with people as a collaboration, based on mutual respect and regard, recognising the strengths and strategies that people are already bringing to solve problems and mitigate their risks, while learning about the areas in which they might require help, and unlocking the support that working with other survivors in group settings can provide. We develop a personal recovery plan with people for whom we provide individual recovery support, dependent on our capacity to fund this work independently, as it is not currently foreseen in Domestic Abuse commissioning models.

Empowerment

Ultimately, support from VOICES should enhance a person's sense of agency in their own recovery journey. We hope that by supporting people to regain a say in their lives and in their recovery, we can aid trauma healing and help survivors and their families to rebuild their lives and realise their full potential as unique and amazing individuals. Part of this work includes the opportunity to provide insights from lived experience to policy makers and services.

VOICES Services - a Team Approach

Providing direct support to people who have experienced domestic abuse in a multi-disciplinary and holistic way, but also advocating for and supporting other agencies and services to provide appropriate and responsive support that does not re-traumatise or stigmatise people dealing with complex situations or in recovery from abuse.

Working with the commissioned Independent Domestic Violence Adviser (IDVA) service at Southside Family Project and Julian House refuge & safe accommodation teams to ensure that a practitioner- and lived experience-informed referral and support network can be developed through monthly meetings, which began at VOICES in February 2023 and will rotate among these and other services joining the group through 2023.

A sense of safety: Trauma-informed approaches for women Report published by AGENDA (supporting women & girls at risk) and The Centre for Mental Health, November 2019, called for all public services and the National Institute for Clinical Excellence to adopt trauma informed principles. <https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/publications/sense-safety>

We asked the question:
“How helpful has it been to have
several sources of support?”

I escaped living with a perpetrator, VOICES helped me reclaim my life. My life, my head and finances were in a muddle so having several sources of help available was invaluable. It is scary when you escape from a perpetrator and to trust is difficult. Being able to access the resources and advice from someone you trust is essential.

There's a benefit that comes with being able to work alongside others, but also having support in terms of personal recovery. Having access to that during my survival journey is incredibly important.

I finally found the words to describe what trauma I'd been through after years of trying to deal with the abuse I've suffered with my whole life. The group sessions were so insightful and made me feel less alone and the counselling helped me face some of my demons. I've still got some work to do but VOICES will hold my hand when I'm ready again.

Having just one support system that is able to help with so many topics has been hugely beneficial. Not having to repeat myself to several agencies saved me a lot of mental upset.

VOICES: A team effort! In our own words...

“To me, VOICES is the place where victims and survivors are heard, valued and responded to as individuals with their own unique experiences. Those experiences include domestic abuse and our team's role is to join their journey as they identify and make sense of what has happened so they can recover psychologically, practically, financially, and as parents.

This journey will often include group work. I am lucky to be able to facilitate, with others, the shared knowledge, experiences and peer support that strengthen and nurture the women we work with in groups. Many clients (men and women) also utilise our 1 to 1 casework, legal clinic or support through family court enabling them to navigate systems that can retraumatise and derail recovery long after escaping the relationship.

The specialist trauma informed approach of every worker and therapist at VOICES begins to slowly, and safely dismantle the invisible walls of isolation built by abuse. Isolation is both a tool of abuse and a result, so I am proud that our multidisciplinary model builds new healing connections and safe relationships that are the foundations of a new life.

I am both inspired and challenged daily by our work at VOICES. We will continue to reflect, learn, adjust and review, as a team, in partnership with the people that use our service and with valued partners. I hope that this impact report gives you an insight into our journey as a charity, thank you very much for reading and supporting VOICES.” - **VOICES' Head of Services**

"I work as the Referrals and Law Lead for VOICES. This means that I am generally the first point of contact for new clients, which will often be the first time they have ever discussed abuse in any detail. I also coordinate VOICES' free law clinic with the University of the West of England (UWE). Certain clients are unable to access legal support so wind up representing themselves as litigants in person; the legal clinic is a vital service which helps them be able to navigate through the court system, alongside support from VOICES. It is a role I am particularly proud of and working with VOICES, although often challenging, is an absolute honour." -**VOICES' Referrals and Law Lead**

“To me, VOICES is the place where your opinion and needs matter as much as those of anyone else. Key features of my role are taking the time and building the trust to be able to understand and work with clients in a way that is meaningful for them. Ensuring that dignity and respect are at the epicentre of everything we do. Standing on the sidelines shouting encouragement or helping someone find their shoes before they leave the house, it's about being there and believing in them and helping them help themselves... they can believe in themselves as unique individuals.” - **VOICES Recovery Practitioner**

To me, VOICES is the centre of empowerment to those who have suffered the long lasting effects of abusive relationships. Supporting clients throughout their journey gives them the confidence to strive towards a brighter future, knowing they are not alone. What this achieves for the people we support is the feeling they can use their own voice, find their independence and discover their own path of happiness.- **VOICES Recovery Practitioner**

"I work part time behind the scenes to help the charity run smoothly and make sure that we are working towards our mission to support and empower survivors of domestic abuse in a trauma informed way. I track how much of a difference we are making to people's lives and collect feedback in order that we continually improve. I also support staff with their HR needs and make sure that the charity's policies, procedures and systems are up to date and trauma informed. This helps keep people and their data safe so that the whole charity - from services to the way we work as a charity - is safe and inclusive." - **VOICES' Executive Officer**

"The lived experience group was set up by and for women to take a more active role in their recovery journey... Within the centre, the lived experience group are given the freedom to set their own agendas and get involved with what they feel most passionate about. There is great power and solidarity when women support women. The women in the group are constantly thinking of creative ways for raising awareness of what domestic violence is and how it plays out in relationships and recovery. Their current plans are to build collective resources around the recovery journey. They named the resource 'recovery journey' to capture the essence of ongoing movement and rather than an end point, or destination...In safe and supported ways, VOICES bridge the gap between people who have experienced domestic violence and people who provide services." - **VOICES' Lived Experience Group member**

"I work within a pluralistic framework, meaning that I can offer clients a tailored approach to therapy. Clients require different approaches at different stages of therapy, so this framework is collaborative and person centred. My particular focus of training is trauma informed, (I am also a qualified Sexual Violence Liaison Officer). Working this way with survivors of domestic abuse is highly beneficial, due to the often complex set of emotions and needs resulting from trauma. Over the last 10 month I have worked with seven survivors of domestic abuse who have experienced varying degrees of trauma, some who have multiple traumas stemming from early childhood. For those with multiple traumas from relationships, being able to offer 18 sessions has been vital in their long-term recovery." - **VOICES' counsellor**

"I have a lovely job as I get to greet and sign in all the attendees that arrive. It is so nice to have a little chat and offer them a drink while they wait in our reception area. It gives them a moment to draw breath and relax a little bit before they go into their group work or 1:1 meetings. I field incoming calls and emails to the team and support them with administrative duties. I manage the social media for VOICES at the moment and really enjoy how creative this can be and how it helps the VOICES community stay connected. My other duties are varied and revolve around looking after the smooth running of the VOICES building and keeping the therapy spaces welcoming, warm and safe. It is so important that the survivors, support team and practitioners feel they are in a safe and relaxed environment to do deep recovery work." - **VOICES' Centre Administrator**

Challenging Domestic Abuse: Changing Lives

Mission Priority 1

1. To create a whole-picture service - develop innovative direct support across a whole range of services that address multiple disadvantage from a strengths-based perspective, build resilience, help clients and their families recover and thrive as a local resource and create a nationally relevant centre of excellence in trauma recovery after domestic abuse

Acknowledging Recovery is prevention

VOICES' has gained insights from 9 years of providing holistic support for local people impacted by domestic abuse at any stage of their journey. These include the understanding that trauma recovery work is both a form of early help and prevention for adults and family members. It has the potential to support people and their children to heal from past impacts and guard against further traumatisation by services or future unhealthy relationships.

A joint inspection carried out in late 2017 in 6 areas in England by Inspectors from Ofsted, the Care Quality Commission, HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services, and HM Inspectorate of Probation to evaluate the multi-agency response to cases of domestic abuse found that prevention and repair were essential, yet rarely prioritised, in supporting children and families affected by domestic abuse.

More recently, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's report **A Patchwork of Provision**, published in November 2022, noted that "Fewer than half of victims and survivors were able to access the community-based support that they wanted, and only 35% said accessing help was easy or straightforward. Only 29% of victims and survivors who wanted support for their children were able to access it and that only 7% of victims and survivors who wanted their perpetrator to receive support to change their behaviour were able to get it." The Report also confirmed that access to specialist therapeutic support was a vital part of recovery and a priority nationwide for victims and survivors of domestic abuse, yet was among the least funded domestic abuse interventions. VOICES set up our own counselling service addressing both domestic and sexual abuse impacts, in recognition of the local need, but have yet to find commissioned or dedicated funding for the work, meaning that we have to continually raise funds for this vital work to take place at all.

The recovery journey

Freedom Programme

Specialist counselling

1:1 Advice

Peer support

Lived Experience consultation

Contributing to research

Legal Clinic



Advocacy

Recovery Toolkit

A quote from Southside Family Project



"Southside recognise that survivors of domestic abuse do continue to suffer the traumatic effects of domestic abuse even when the risk from their abuser has ended or reduced. We focus on the long term recovery of our clients and wherever possible look to continue this journey by ongoing referrals to other specialist partner organisations.

With regards to this aim Southside have a very beneficial relationship with VOICES. Many of our clients are referred to VOICES once our work around risk is completed. It is so beneficial for our clients to be able to access ongoing support from VOICES with regards to accessing the recovery programmes that they run in addition to peer support. Their work on this ongoing journey of recovery is therefore invaluable.

In addition VOICES through their work can also refer clients to us if risk is identified within the support they are offering. By having an effective joined up working partnership with VOICES we are able to give victims of domestic abuse in the BANES area a comprehensive support package that focuses both on risk reduction and recovery."



- Andy, Head of Services, Southside Family Project

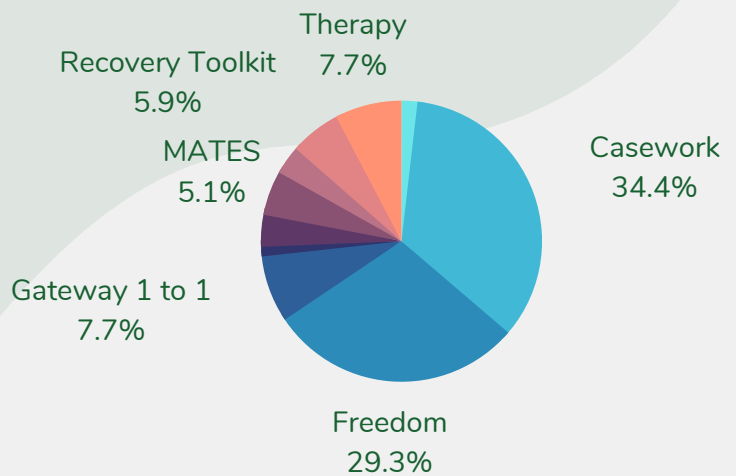
VOICES Services

VOICES services are created by and for people with lived experience of domestic abuse. We are able to engage with people where they are, when they need it, and for the longer term.

We offer:

- Holistic support services
- Group recovery programmes
- 1:1 Advocacy, advice and support
- Specialist counselling
- Guidance on parenting after abuse
- Legal clinic
- Financial hardship support
- A Lived Experience Group

Holistic support services

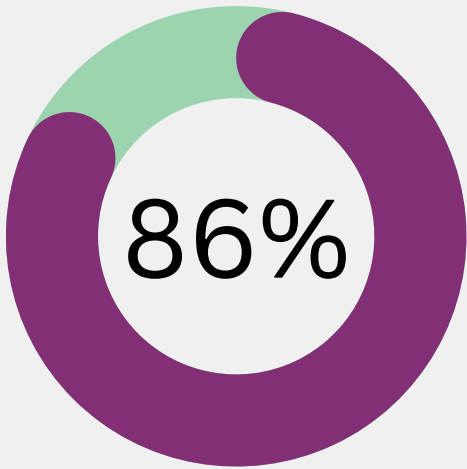


“I've found each source of support has its own unique benefits and has allowed me to access different areas of understanding and to move forwards in different ways. The group work has allowed me to see things from other, kinder perspectives. You are always harder on yourself than on others, so reflecting this forgiveness onto myself has been so important. It has honestly been life-changing to be part of the Freedom Programme; meeting other people with similar experiences and not only seeing but believing you are not alone. The 1:1 support I have received from VOICES has also been life-changing. I was in a place where I saw no way out. I was frightened and alone. Despite having a close group of family and friends around me, none of them really seemed to understand what was happening and how it had affected me. I was alone in a crowd. The 1:1 support I have received has made me feel heard and acknowledged and believed. Whilst I find and always have found it easy to advocate for others, I feel like I am coming back to a place where I can begin to advocate for myself again. I am beginning to feel that I deserve to have good people around me and that I deserve the support and belief that VOICES have in me. The counselling I have received has been incredible. I entered the process wanting to engage fully, but very dubious about the whole counselling process. It was so easy to work with my counsellor and to build a rapport with her. She has helped me to believe in myself and to believe that I do deserve better.

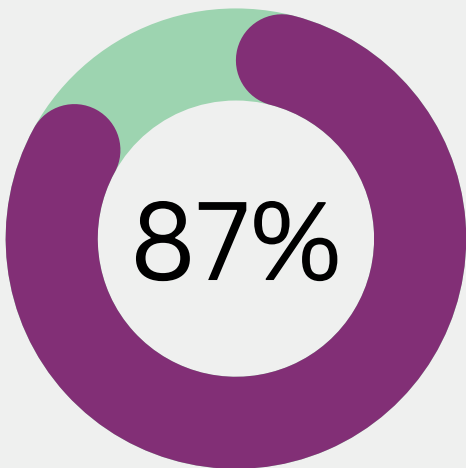
When all three aspects of support are pulled together, I have been gifted so much strength, belief and solidarity.” - A VOICES Client

Clients have consistently told us the flexible, choice based, trauma Informed support from VOICES has made the difference between returning to or entering into another abusive relationship and focusing on their recovery and a fulfilling future for them and their children. 86% of attendees thought it was useful to have multiple sources of support. (2023)

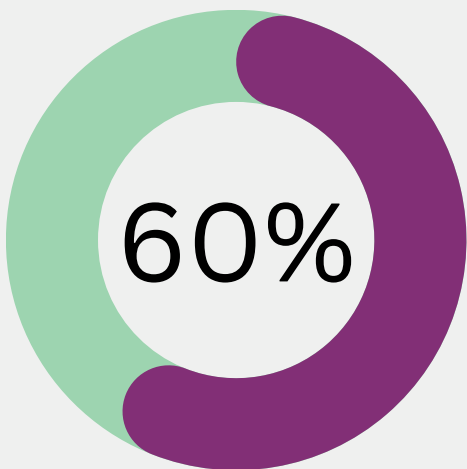
Feedback from 2023



It has been very useful to have multiple sources of support from VOICES



Group work had been extremely helpful



After receiving VOICES support they had been able to help someone else going through similar

Stronger together: Group recovery programmes

“It has been great for learning how to be "me" again amongst women who have similar experiences. Sharing ideas and feeling valued is also a source of motivation. I've met some fabulous people along the way and many that I hope will continue to feature in some way or another in my future life. That's been great for confidence and not feeling so alone and misunderstood.”

VOICES runs face to face groups for clients, including the Freedom Programme, the Recovery Toolkit and a Lived Experience Group. This year there have been 76 attendees of groups. 87% said it had been ‘extremely helpful’ to be a part of a group and meet with others who have had similar experiences.

VOICES provides the only face-to-face group programme for domestic abuse survivors in Bath & Northeast Somerset

“I finally found the words to describe what trauma I'd been through after years of trying to deal with the abuse I've suffered with my whole life. The group sessions were so insightful and made me feel less alone and the counselling helped me face some of my demons. I've still got some work to do but Voices will hold my hand when I'm ready again.”

We asked: How helpful has it been to be a part of a peer support group?

It has been great for learning how to be "me" again amongst women who have similar experiences. Sharing ideas and feeling valued is also a source of motivation. I've met some fabulous people along the way and many that I hope will continue to feature in some way or another in my future life. That's been great for confidence and not feeling so alone and misunderstood.

I learned, over time, to open up and share my experiences in a safe friendly environment. I quickly began to own my thoughts and situation. It gave me confidence to begin the terrifying process of leaving my marriage.

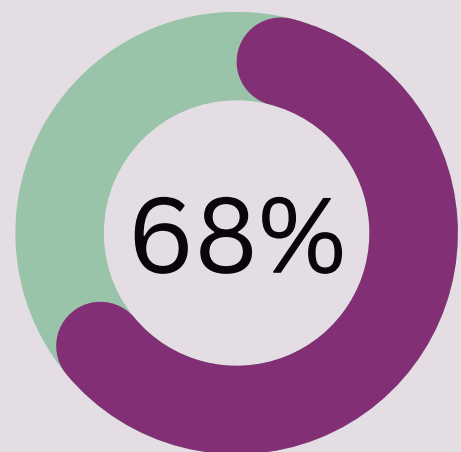
It is very helpful to meet with other women that have gone through similar experiences. In group settings, such as the Freedom Programme and Recovery Toolkit, this is invaluable. It helps you understand what you've been through and makes the abuse easier to understand. Hearing other people talk helps you realise you're not going mad! I have made friends from the groups I have joined and it has been a very positive experience.

Advocacy, Advice and Support

“My mental health has improved, my confidence has increased, my support network has grown, my boundaries have been tightened, my self-respect has grown, and my understanding of unhealthy relationships has improved, learning how to say 'no' has been one of the biggest challenges for me as well as calling the police when needed, due to an unhealthy upbringing, but VOICES have made me feel reborn and able to use the tools they have taught me to do this.”

VOICES provides whole-picture support on an individual basis, supporting people either remotely if wished or directly with safety and safeguarding, family court proceedings, education and child contact issues, statutory services involvement, housing & refuge, financial abuse, debt and benefits advocacy work.

In addition to group work, VOICES have provided 1:1 casework support to 68% of the 137 people supported



Specialist Counselling



"When I joined VOICES I was terrified of life and even to join the VOICES group sessions. My child and I were struggling. I'm convinced without it I would have ended up in another abusive relationship. I was having a lot of time off work with stress which the counselling helped so much with." Feedback 2023



VOICES provides intensive support to those most at risk, and continues to also facilitate in-person counselling sessions. This year 20 clients have been supported by individual counselling at VOICES, provided by our experienced and specialist domestic abuse counsellors. We have also referred people for support from other therapeutic services, and raised funds for these services to be provided, where necessary.

Generic approaches that are not trauma informed or specialist in nature may fail to address or even worsen a client's trauma and PTSD. In response to people's needs, VOICES provides specialist psychotherapy support addressing both domestic abuse and often co-existing sexual abuse, or childhood abuse experiences. This is long-term, trauma-informed and person-centred psychotherapy with a focus on stabilisation and recovery. It provides added value to group work, as women are able to attend while receiving support with embedded trauma.

Case study

A series of therapeutic sessions with a mother of young children, who had experienced abuse herself in childhood, began with addressing past relationships. Further sessions developed a timeline on paper, helping her identify re-occurring emotions and thoughts connecting to relationships. This helped discuss early childhood experiences and connect them to adulthood experiences. Later sessions discuss why boundaries are important both in relationships and parenting, then in exploring self worth, shame and trauma and how complex trauma can affect us. She began to recognise what are healthy and unhealthy relationships during these sessions as she explored online dating. The awareness she developed during the sessions helped her in the few dates she went on. She realised that she didn't want a relationship and wanted to concentrate on herself and her children. This was a big step forward for her and she said she 'feels empowered for the first time in her life'. 'For the first time ever I am prioritising myself and realising that it's ok to love myself'. Over the 18 sessions, she made significant progress in confidence and self worth and began to put boundaries in place with her own parent and children but also for any future relationships.

Parenting after abuse



“The work you do really is life changing for women and their families, I can't imagine where my son and I would be without your support. And thank you!”



Almost everything VOICES does is crucially influential in the lives of the children whose parents we support. This year we supported 51 families with a total of 89 children.

- **70% reported feeling more confident in their parenting.**
- **80% said they better understood the effect of the abuse on their children.**

In the Freedom Programme the sections on the Effects of Violence on Children are instrumental in helping mothers identify the effects on them and on their children of their situations. As they move forward with their lives, they are better informed and more able to avoid similar situations.

Younger children benefit from future relationships which are hopefully healthier. Older children have mothers who have tools to teach them about moving into their adult life in a responsible and respectful way and this will have an effect on any children they may go on to have, thus benefiting future generations.

Because the mothers of pre-teen children who come to us receive help in terms of practical and emotional support around housing/debt/benefits/social aspects/education etc. we are instrumental in providing a stronger and more reliable foundation than there may have been for these children.

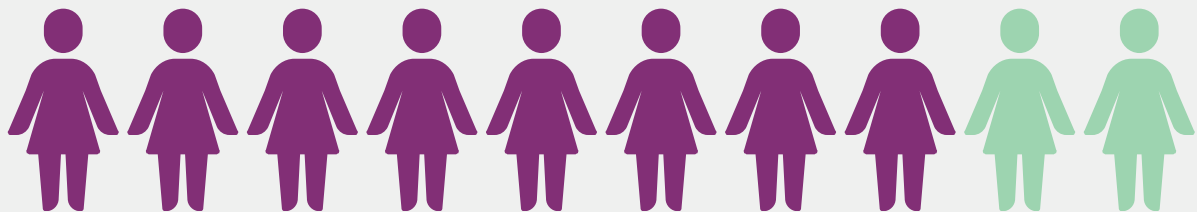
“At my first contact with VOICES, I couldn't see a way forward or a way out of the awful situation I was in. I truly believed I had let my little boy down in every way possible. I believed that I was the cause of everything that had happened and that there was no way to change things. I was terrified. Hurting my little boy was the only way left to hurt me and that had been used again and again. The legal system had let us down. The 'care' system in all its aspects had let us down. I had asked for help from so many people and their responses had indirectly minimised or placed the blame back on me every time. From the moment (VOICES support worker) stepped into our lives everything changed. Having somebody who advocates for us and who listens and actually hears what I am saying is invaluable. Knowing there is somebody who has your back, means you can take those risks; you can risk opening up; you can risk speaking about things that happened; you can risk asking for help and support; you can risk trusting somebody again.”

The difference VOICES has made... (feedback from clients)

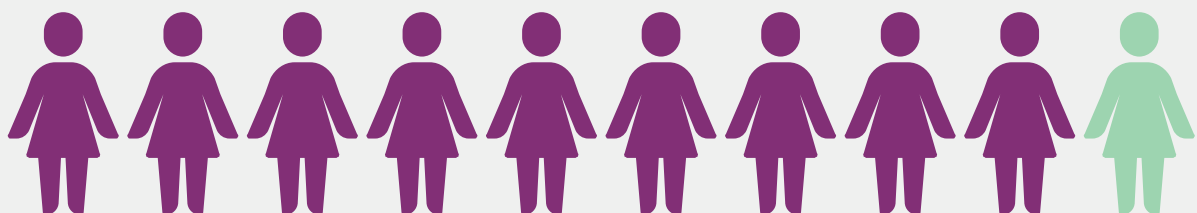
"I understand better how I have been impacted by abuse"



"I now have increased access to the support and resources I need to recover from the abuse"



"My emotional wellbeing has improved"



"I feel more confident in myself"



Legal Clinic

VOICES' legal clinic is run in conjunction with the University of the West of England (UWE). With individual support from the team, clients continued to gain advice and support in order to attend remote court hearings at a safe space with a support worker, or at home if preferred.

This service is provided free of charge by VOICES and is also open to referrals from Southside IDVA service.

This need is a prominent theme of our work as many of our clients are not able to access legal aid, so cannot rely on the support of a solicitor or barrister through the court process. A combination of advice from the legal clinic and support from VOICES helps give people the tools they need to act as a litigant in person, through the family courts.



Financial Abuse Support

The cost of living crisis has made those subject to coercive control and financial abuse even more vulnerable.

Specialist advocacy from VOICES and elsewhere is critical in understanding the whole picture around finances, debt and need that together create hardship for adult and child victims of domestic abuse.

Crucial, small-scale financial and practical help at the right time can be instrumental in helping survivors make significant progress towards recovery and a productive and fulfilled life after domestic abuse.

12% - almost 1 in 8 of VOICES clients - received Hardship funding to overcome barriers at transition points in their recovery.

During the Cost of Living Crisis, the Hardship Fund has proven an innovative and flexible way to address unexpected expenses over lockdown for women who have had a drop in income or needed to update tech in order to homeschool.

The Circle Fund

VOICES have been part of a national scheme called the Circle Fund, run by SafeLives and funded by NatWest, involving specialist services around the country.

This groundbreaking national pilot concluded in June 2023 and the final report will deliver new knowledge about the nature of financial/economic abuse, about gaps in provision of short-term crisis funding for abuse survivors, and about the barriers hindering recovery for survivors and their families.

We were able to support clients with 80 Circle Fund grants, meeting varied needs including increased home security, access to refuges, travel costs to attend court, cooking items, moving costs, new mattresses, flooring, maternity clothing and mobile phones.

Case Study

After receiving support from the Circle Fund, A is financially stable, and feels safer. With our support and advocacy, she has accessed funds and other services, improving her capacity to recover, regaining trust in others and her own ability to improve her circumstances. A is no longer isolated and has a network of support through the women she has met on the Freedom Programme, she has been able to stop all contact with the perpetrator.

Supporting families in the cost of living crisis

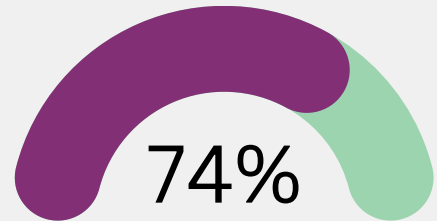
VOICES' focus on whole family support, even though our programmes currently work only with adult caregivers and pre-school children via creche services. As such, when the Cost of Living crisis hit immediately following the relaxation of COVID-19 constraints, VOICES mobilised to provide a much targeted support to the families we work with as was possible for a small charity.

Examples of outcomes benefiting parents and children during the Cost of Living crisis include:

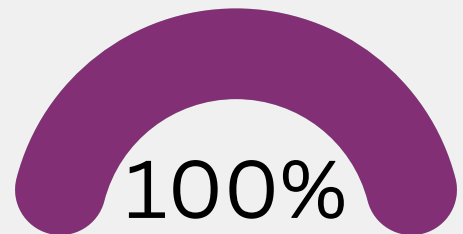
- Providing 200 people with energy advice and support, working together with specialist energy consultant.
- Distributed 80 warm packs to households in the 2022/23 winter season
- Produced an accessible guide to DIY and low/no cost adaptations to your home to help reduce energy consumption and utility bills, which was distributed to clients.
- Visited women in their homes to advise on energy and condensation issues,
- Advocated with social housing providers to make changes to ensure health and wellbeing of families during the 2022/23 winter fuel crisis
- Provided electric blankets, draft excluders and other energy saving items to clients across Bath & North East Somerset
- Provided low-cost food preparation items, including microwaves and air fryers
- Raised £9990 in funds to help our clients via the Western Power Distribution Community Matters Fund
- Raised a further £5000 via a new application to the NatWest/ SafeLives Circle Fund to provide hardship and crisis relief payments to clients through the year for items such as new secure mobile phones for adults and young people, home security devices, providing wellbeing support and essential items
- Providing a bridge into other services including Southside Family Support, refuge and children's centres.
- Supported a young mother into refuge provision when her abusive family jeopardised her living situation in social housing.
- Accessing safe accommodation (refuge) for one woman and her teenager who are now recovering from 15 years of post-separation abuse.

Wellbeing survey results as reported by clients

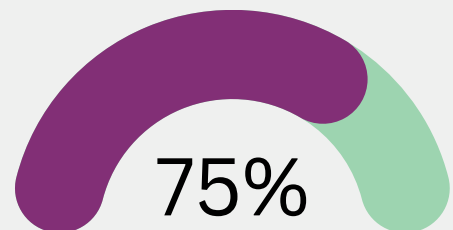
- 74% experienced an overall improvement in their Wellbeing



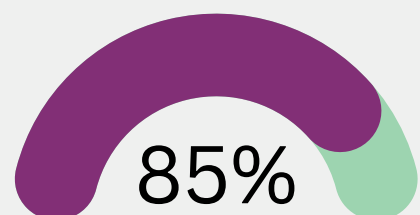
- 100% felt better able to identify abuse



- 75% felt more confident to ask for help



- 85% felt their support networks had improved



Mission Priority 2

To create whole-system change through putting survivor voice at the heart of policy & research; to develop VOICES as a platform for those with lived experience, providing opportunities for clients to contribute to research and policy, sharing learning and recovery expertise as a national resource for achieving system change in relation to domestic abuse.

To enable survivors to contribute safely to knowledge about domestic abuse, support to recover sufficiently must be provided. VOICES set out to fund and provide this kind of recovery support, so that whole-system learning, and change, becomes possible.

“We have consulted with VOICES experts by experience group for several research projects to help ensure that our research design and process is ethical, does not cause harm to survivors and is relevant to people who use domestic abuse services. VOICES have given us feedback in group consultations or individual written feedback on documents; this has been invaluable throughout the past two years. VOICES has helped us re-evaluate how we deliver workshops online and face to face to ensure that participants feel safe and included. VOICES has improved the quality of our written materials and our research materials (such as interview schedules and survey questions) so that we ask relevant questions and communicate more effectively. VOICES has also helped steer the direction of research projects to ensure that we think about questions of interest to experts by experience, and not just health professionals, from the beginning of studies. We cannot emphasise how much the expert advice, guidance and critique has supported us to improve the quality of our research and its dissemination.”

Dr Claire Powell, UCL, NIHR Children & Families Policy Research Unit

Our role in development and research alongside academic and strategic partners offers our clients the opportunity to use their lived experiences. In 2022/23, 60% of clients said that due to their VOICES experience they had been able to help others in a similar position.

These consulting activities are an opportunity for clients to transform negative experiences into valuable insights for policy makers, which feedback confirms can be healing and empowering. Effective change and the creation of appropriate services can only happen through co-creation.

VOICES' founding mission to ensure survivors are at the heart of the conversation locally and nationally around how best to prevent and respond to domestic abuse has resulted in impacts both locally and nationally, which have become more concrete through 2022/23, and extend across family law (family law professionals and training needs, Cafcass and child contact), health and mental health (Violence and Abuse Mental Health Network), and local government (advocating for survivor to be creating, not merely rating services at local area level).

Lived Experience Consultation Work

“I hope at least some good can come from the awful experience I have had. I hope that the feedback and information I have given about my experiences, both during and after the abusive relationship, might help women in the future. If lived experience work can help services such as the legal profession understand and be more caring, then I will feel I have achieved something worthwhile.”



Providing space for people with lived experience who want to celebrate recovery to come together has always been a priority for VOICES. Our new building, The Villa, provides a wonderful space we are keen to share with local survivors of domestic abuse wanting to meet and socialise, and to work together for change and to raise awareness.

This group plans to meet on a monthly basis wherever possible, and VOICES supports and facilitates these activities. This is work in development, and will be led and designed by its members. VOICES continues to seek dedicated funding for this work, and is able to draw on some donation income to support it in the interim. If any local supporters would like to raise money to support people with lived experience in this way, we are really interested to hear from you!

In 2022/23, VOICES contributed to lived experience consultation through partnership and relationship building in the following ways:

- Membership of the **Domestic Abuse Partnership (DAP) Board** in Bath & North East Somerset (the only non-commissioned specialist service and survivor voice organisation to sit on the Board), gaining agreement that all actions agreed by the DAP will include the aspect of survivor consultation.
- Founder members of a **survivor voice subgroup** of the DAP
- Membership of the **Avon & Somerset Domestic Abuse Strategic Board**, reporting on survivor consultation work and family law concerns
- Joining the **Local Family Justice Board (LFJB) for Avon & Somerset**. Working with the LFJB to help put together a very successful annual conference focused on domestic abuse and family justice at the University of the West of England on 19 May 2023, at which the Domestic Abuse Commissioner Nicole Jacobs was a keynote speaker. VOICES spoke about coercive control and the family court system, and SafeLives presented the results of the Trauma Training for Family Lawyers, for which VOICES facilitated lived experience consultations.
- Proposed a **domestic abuse working group** within the LFJB, to be established in 2023.
- Took part in the steering group of the **Trauma Informed Training for Family Lawyers** project by SafeLives/VOICES with the Legal Education Foundation
- CEO involvement in the Expert Advisory Group of the research project, **Rethinking Domestic Abuse in Child Protection**. Funded by the Nuffield Foundation, RDAC brings together researchers from the Universities of Sheffield, Huddersfield, Kingston, with Research in Practice, SafeLives and FutureMen.
- Continued membership of the **Cafcass Learning & Improvement Board**, alongside other lived experience advocates from the Family Rights Group, the Family Justice Young People's Board, Women's Aid, SafeLives etc. Our contributions supported the Board to work in a more trauma-informed way with adult and child survivors.
- Continued membership of **Women's Aid Research Policy, Consultation and Campaigns Group (RPCC)**
- VOICES are members of the **Violence and Abuse Mental Health Research Network**, as part of which we have worked with the Institute of Child Health/UCL and King's College London.
- The **Natwest Circle Fund Steering Group** - a national specialist hardship fund for survivors with NatWest Bank and SafeLives - concluding in 2023 with a report into the need and impact for this form of support across England & Wales.

Impact of VOICES' lived experience consultation work

Research involvement of survivor insights produced outcomes, and achieved far wider impact that our small charity could otherwise achieve, in papers published in the British Medical Journal and BMC Primary Care.

Child and family-focused interventions for child maltreatment and domestic abuse: development of core outcome sets.

VOICES were involved in a lived-experience consultation and advisory capacity in this project to identify consensus nationally about a set of core outcomes that were meaningful and reliable measures of the benefits of child & family support programmes for domestic abuse (<https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/12/9/e064397>)

The recommended 5 Core Outcomes were:

- Child emotional health and well-being: includes emotions, mood, internalising problems, emotional regulation, emotional security and emotional numbness.
- Feelings of safety: for non-abusive parent and child; global safety, including psychological, physical, body, family, neighbourhood around perpetrator, at home, at school, in the community, on social media, from abusive individuals, from child removal, from court proceedings.
- Caregiver emotional health and well-being: includes emotional functioning, emotional reactions, emotions, emotional self-regulation, control over emotions, ability to connect to emotions, mood, frame of mind, general sense of well-being.
- Family relationships: includes overall family relationships and functioning, quality and type of relationships, feeling closer as a family, family conflict resolution, feeling closer to children, changes after leaving abusive partner; sibling relationships including after separation; child relationship with birth and foster/adoptive families.
- Freedom to go about daily life: includes ability to get home safely from school/work/friends/family, etc

These all closely correlate with the programme of support provided at VOICES and what we measure, based on what survivors have told us they need.



VOICES' contribution to the Cafcass Learning & Improvement Board 2020-2023

"The Harm Panel's report (published in June 2020) identified systemic failings of the family justice system, which Cafcass plays a key role in. The report made criticisms of the work of Cafcass that; we persuade children to see the other parent when they do not want to, we do not engage enough with other agencies and we conflate conflict with domestic abuse. To help Cafcass get this right we established a Learning and Improvement Board to help us develop a Learning and Improvement Plan for our domestic abuse practice, agreeing milestones and monitoring progress. Key to the success of this was to work directly with partners across the family justice system, learn from international examples of good practice and learn from children and parents with experience of our service. This included learning from people with expertise from organisations that specialise in supporting children and adults who are or have experienced Domestic Abuse; such as VOICES.

The work of the Learning and Improvement Board which included VOICES has led to significant policy, practice and cultural change in Cafcass, such as: a new mandatory Domestic Abuse Learning and Development Programme in place for all Family Court Advisers; a Domestic Abuse Practice Pathway and guidance for FCAs; Domestic Abuse Personal Learning Plans for all FCAs; a new relationship-based practice framework, Together with Children and Families and a new Assessment and Child's Plan, with a section for FCAs to share their recommendations with children; and increased avenues to hear from children and families in feedback such as the Cafcass Hear to Listen service and Family Forum.

Our engagement and work with hearing from adults and charities about the lived experience and trauma of domestic abuse has also led directly to the new mandatory training on mental ill health and the abuse of power where there is domestic abuse, Policy and guidance on working with partners, wider family members and professionals has been introduced to help practitioners to consistently speak to those who know the child well. These changes in policy, guidance and training have also led to changes in how we internally audit our work and includes how we assess quality in practice to achieve good outcomes for children affected by domestic abuse. In all our auditing we always ask auditors if domestic abuse was a factor for a family and if there is evidence of minimisation or dismissal of abuse as 'historical', as well as how an FCA has made contact with other professionals and if our engagement uses sensitive language to any trauma.

To be successful it is important to engage and continually engage meaningfully with charities that provide a platform for people with lived experience of domestic abuse to inform and improve service provision. Cafcass will continue its progress through a practice reference group, which will include those with lived experience of domestic abuse, to coordinate our strategic approach to domestic abuse improvement."

-Barry Tilzey, Assistant Director, National Improvement Service, Cafcass



PRECODE Research Project

(Primary care response to domestic violence and abuse in the Covid-19 pandemic)

VOICES provided lived-experience consulting as part of the research advisory group for this project, helping to shape the research to ensure that results were optimised and recommendations were relevant for domestic abuse victims and survivors trying to access support through their GP practices during the COVID-19 lockdown. This is very relevant research for the development of remote consultations, and online access to primary care, all of which is potentially risky for adult and child victims and survivors. VOICES' own early research showed that GPs were among the most trusted sources of help, a result confirmed in more recent studies.

The results of this research project were published in BMC Primary Care (<https://bmcprimcare.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12875-021-01447-3>)



Trauma training for Family Law Professionals

SafeLives/VOICES

Two reports based on consultations funded by the Legal Education Foundation and organised by VOICES as a partner with SafeLives with people with lived experience of domestic abuse and the family justice system: **“Don’t Complain”**, analysing survivors’ experiences of seeking family law support from professionals, and **“Hit and Miss”**, analysing the need for trauma training among family law professionals in the context of domestic abuse. These reports formed the basis for training development and were published in March 2023 and presented at **The Old Bailey** at an event attended by members of the Judicial College, Cafcass, law professionals and researchers.

SafeLives' training was developed and piloted in 3 local areas, including Bath & Bristol. VOICES' staff trained to deliver this in our local area as part of the pilot programme. This programme is a potentially groundbreaking pilot, showing the way for increased trauma awareness among family law professionals. The project concludes in August 2023 with results to be presented in London in September 2023. Interim results report very high levels of positive impact for professionals taking part.

"Don't Complain" (<https://safelives.org.uk/dont-complain/LEF-report>) and "Hit and Miss" (<https://safelives.org.uk/hit-and-miss/LEF-report>) are available on the SafeLives website

Recognition

Visit to VOICES by Her Majesty Queen Camilla

VOICES were delighted to receive the ultimate honour as the charity moved into its own dedicated building, The Villa, with a visit in February 2022 by Her Majesty (then HRH The Duchess of Cornwall) Queen Camilla.

HM Queen Camilla, meeting a founder trustee of VOICES, Farha Rasul, at The Villa in February 2022



Her Majesty met with staff, partner organisations and funders at The Villa, and was particularly generous with her time and attention in meeting women we have had the honour of supporting, in a confidential setting at The Villa. This was a very memorable occasion for everyone involved, and a clear demonstration of the Queen's longstanding commitment to and interest in survivor-led and grassroots organisations working to improve domestic abuse support. We were very grateful for her support.

In her speech at The Villa, Her Majesty said:



“I'd like to thank you all for all you are doing for people who are suffering domestic abuse. As you can imagine I've been around a few centres, a few safe houses and you always get the same feedback from them. Women, and sometimes men I talk to too, they all say you are their lifelines. That they could not exist without all your help, all your therapy and the legal help you give them.”

“This probably wouldn't have happened 20 or 30 years ago but it luckily is happening more and more now. More and more women are able to come forward and tell their stories, which [means] we are making a breakthrough.”

“It's going to take a long time but it is no longer a taboo subject. We've got to get out there and get it out to the general public, because a lot of people, including myself at the beginning, do not know enough about it.”

She told the VOICES team: “All of you do a fantastic job. Onwards and upwards.”



VOICES speaking at the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's Festival of Practice, March 2023

VOICES was invited by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's Office for England and Wales to speak at the first Festival of Practice, celebrating best practice approaches to Domestic Abuse, in Manchester in March 2023.

We were delighted to be included in this event, along with some 500 other guests from the Domestic Abuse sector, funders, commissioners, as well as local & national government, creative arts and community representatives. We presented on the therapeutic model of support and empowerment and trauma informed approach that VOICES has developed, alongside the inspirational Sue Penna, developer of the Recovery Toolkit and subsequent programmes, and Natalie Collins, creator of the Own My Life women's empowerment course.

VOICES look forward to joining the Commissioner's planned national Lived Experience network, to help shape and inform new developments in the sector.



A big thank you...

Supporters and pro bono donors

Our dedicated volunteers and experts by experience for their time and very valuable input

92 Minutes Ltd. for their specialist social media training and support

Tamsin May for her pro bono support with social media

Jaime Ward for his pro bono carpentry and maintenance expertise

All those who joined in our #16days of action wearing a T-Shirt!

Bath 3sg for their support this year

Last but by no means least, our wonderful Board of dedicated and knowledgeable Trustees, who have supported and guided VOICES through 2022/23.

Grant and donor support

Avon & Somerset PCC
Bathnes Public Health (COMF)
Bath Women's Fund
Circle Fund, Safelives
Cobalt Trust
Community Infrastructure Levy Fund
Community Matters Fund
Cooperative Community Fund
Forrester Trust
Funda Kemal
Hobhouse Charitable Trust
Legal Education Foundation
Lloyds Bank Foundation
National Lottery Reaching Communities
Nest
Norman Drake
PCC Paulton Church
Persula Foundation
Pretty Digital
Renishaw
Rosa Fund
St John's Foundation
The 29th May 1961 Charitable Trust
The Annett Charitable Trust
The Tudor Trust
Women's Aid

Concluding Words

Thanks to the support from VOICES...

"I don't feel alone or worthless anymore. I no longer feel the need to numb my feelings with alcohol and self harm. We all deserve better."

"I have started leaving the house. I have been more social. Started a college course with hopes of going to university. Even if my self confidence still suffers, I at least know what not to accept and I won't. and warning signs to look out for. I mostly feel less vulnerable. I've met one of my closest friends. I have started dating (but noticing red flags everywhere). So it is keeping me safe. I learnt to be ok on my own. Try and set better clearer boundaries. Doing CBT."

"I'm getting more assertive. I'm more aware of the signs of abuse. I'm learning to be better at self-care. I have people to talk to when I'm in need of advice. I am beginning to deal with confrontation better and be more direct about what I want and don't want. And I'm learning to be a survivor, not a victim, which isn't easy!"

(Feedback from clients, 2023)

Voices

Your voice matters

"Trauma and abuse are conjoined. We can't invest in ending abuse if we don't invest in healing from trauma. Just as we can't only study war, but need to understand the conditions that promote peace. Unless we do so, we will fail to create a culture that values and promotes healthy relationships and challenges the drivers of abuse. We will be stuck with an A&E service that creates burnout and compassion fatigue for professionals and support workers, particularly those with lived experience, and fails and retraumatizes people who are suffering.

Let the DA Commissioner's groundbreaking national report 'A Patchwork of Provision' be reflected in funding and commissioning policy and investment in trauma informed, local and lived-experience based work by organisations like VOICES and by & for services that have expertise in serving diverse communities of experience.

This is our call to action. Thank you to all those who answer." - Ursula Lindenberg, CEO

