



**Building  
stronger  
families**

# Taking Back Control



**Stories of hope and support from our Canterbury Advice Service**

**June 2019**

# About Our Service

The Canterbury Advice Service is funded by the National Lottery Community Fund to provide support to victims of domestic abuse who require free, quick and confidential specialist benefit advice within Bradford and Keighley.

We provide a range of services including:

- Comprehensive income maximisation, benefits and generalist debt advice
- Support with complex issues relating to benefit claims, including refusals
- Tax credit over payments
- Changes in housing benefit
- Problems relating to child benefit and child tax credit – particularly advising clients on the compliance section when unsure of what evidence or proof is required
- Providing interpretation and clarification of complex benefit forms from the Department of Work and Pensions
- A range of information leaflets addressing key areas required by our clients

When first meeting with a client we find out their strengths through an assessment and tailor support to these, with the aim of promoting self reliance and rebuilding the confidence that may have been eroded whilst in an abusive domestic situation.

Clients can self refer or we can accept referrals from the police, social services, friends or family members, health professionals, schools or any other statutory or voluntary organisation.

This report aims to illustrate the human impact of our work by providing real-world examples of the lives we've helped to change. All names have been changed to safeguard the identities of those involved.



## Hannah

Abuse is all Hannah has ever known from the men in her life.

Her father was a domineering figure who told her to speak only when spoken to, beat her with a belt and kicked her out at a young age.

She found work to keep afloat but says that she married young in part because of a desire for security.

Her husband wasn't working and so looked after the children while she worked – a situation which led to her having to leave when he hit her youngest child while they were still a very small baby.

A divorce swiftly followed and times were hard, to the degree where she was partially dependent on handouts.

Despite all her problems she continued to work, and it was through work that Hannah met her second husband.

Understandably cautious, she dated her husband for a year before marrying, and remembers this as a positive time... But she says things changed almost immediately.

He became argumentative and controlling - preventing her from seeing her family... but Hannah really realised that there was something drastically wrong when he

wasn't there for the birth of his son.

She added: "He just wasn't interested and never played with him afterward".

There were also suggestions of physical violence, with her husband threatening to throw her down the stairs.

Despite being desperately unhappy she has stayed in the relationship for decades and found our service almost by accident when a GP she was seeing for unrelated health problems suggested she get counselling.

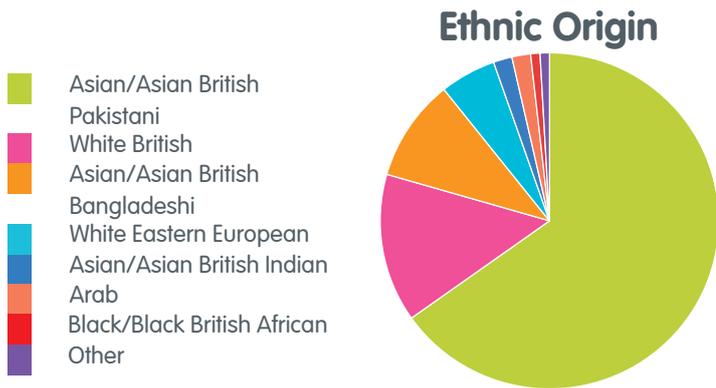
Her councillor put her in touch with the domestic abuse service Staying Put, who in turn referred her onto us for help with getting attendance allowance for her health concerns.

She said "I was dreading meeting your team at first but after meeting a member of your staff I found she was such a lovely and warm person who put me at ease.

"She is one of the only person who has actually made me feel I am worthy of listening to and she has helped me a lot".

Hannah is still dealing with her domestic situation but says that thanks to our service she is able to do so with a new found confidence, and financial security.

# Our Clients



We have worked with 112 clients in the last year (April 2018-19)

The vast majority are women from black and minority ethnic communities and a wide range of languages are spoken – including Russian, Latvian, Urdu, Punjabi, Turkish, and more.

These clients are vulnerable and often in times of crisis – facing issues such as significant debt and eviction - in addition to coping with the negative emotional and mental impact of domestic abuse.

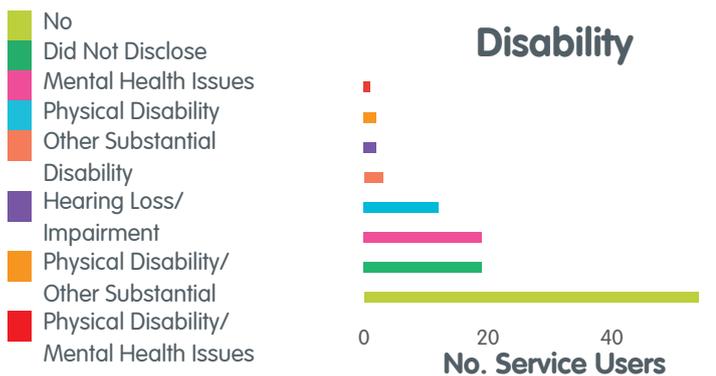
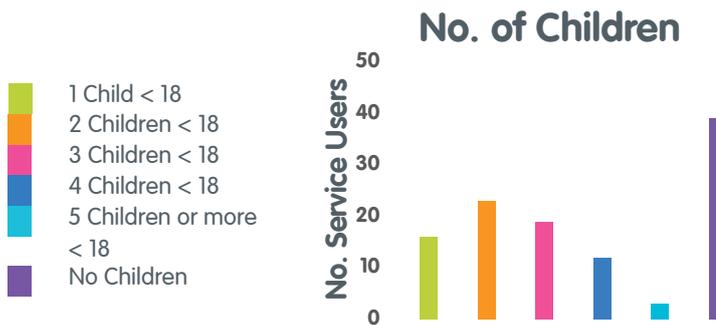
Many have little to no knowledge of rights and benefits and have not had the opportunity to develop skills like budgeting or computer literacy.

Around 90% have left their abusive partner when we see them, while the other 10% are considering whether to do so.

In addition, an increasing proportion of the women we work with face complex issues such as mental health problems, learning or physical disabilities, social isolation, substance misuse, and more.

Many do not speak English and as such require a translator or a family friend who can help with communication.

Although the service can work with men at present all those working with the service are women.



# Connections

We work in close partnership with a wide variety of organisations and services across Keighley and Bradford and have forged strong relationships with domestic violence services (including Keighley DVS, Staying Put, and Bradford Women’s Aid), mental health support services (including Roshni Ghar, Bradford Immigration and Asylum Support Network, and Community Mental Health Services), schools, GP surgeries, Social Services, and Wellbeing Centres. This includes receiving referrals from them, using their rooms for meetings with clients that they have referred, and occasional translation support when we do not have the language skills in-house.

## Testimonial - Roshni Ghar

“Family Action holds weekly appointment-only sessions on our premises which are always in high demand, with sessions booked several weeks in advance. We believe this is because your service goes above and beyond its role in supporting service users, and your staff demonstrate professionalism in all aspects of your work. Your Bilingual Advice Worker speaks fluent English, Urdu and Punjabi, is approachable and friendly and, as a woman, can empathise with the women we come into contact with.

We also praise her skill and patience working with people with complex mental and physical health conditions, something which she does with ease, compassion and empathy.

We feel that these women would not feel comfortable in any other setting or with any other advisor and when we try to refer these women to other settings they always insist on seeing Family Action.

We would very much like Family Action to continue delivering sessions at Roshni Ghar as currently the service represents the only female bi-lingual welfare rights advisor offering support to vulnerable women in Keighley”.

# Yusra

Thanks to Family Action Yusra is throwing off decades of imprisonment in her own home and rediscovering the free, independent woman she once was.

When Yusra met her husband she had an enviable life – she had purchased a house with money she'd saved herself from working and says she felt loved, supported and even a little spoiled for attention by her doting family.

She was little prepared for the intimidation, control and abuse that started almost immediately after her wedding day, and would last for more than a decade.

She said: "We come from a nice family and my brothers are really good to their wives. I never thought he'd really be like that because every other man in our family is really respectful.

"I had always seen my mom and dad have a good loving relationship, and I thought that when I got married that's how it would be".

Her husband told her she didn't need to work as her job would be to stay at home and raise their children and, despite earning money through working, he remortgaged her house and cut off all access to finances.

Although he did the shopping, Yusra remembers that he would leave it until they'd completely run out, and she would have to beg for essentials for their children.

She said: "Even if the kids wanted something from the shop I would have to ask him.

"If I spent money on the kids I would have to give the change back and tell him exactly what was spent and give the money left over back to him.

"For the years we were married I rarely went out to shop... I would sometimes sneak out with children and we'd be in big trouble if he found out".

Money was always an issue for him and yet he bought an expensive car for himself but refused to allow her to have driving lessons so she could use it.

Perhaps the most painful aspect, however, was how he damaged her relationship with the family she adored.

She added "I saw less of my parents... slowly I broke apart from my family".

Year by year Yusra's life got smaller and smaller, and she limited herself and found comfort in raising the children he neglected.

Although there was no physical element to the violence Yusra says she felt like a prisoner, and lived in constant fear.

She added: "One day he said "I am so fed up I am going to burn down the house with the children in it" and I thought he was going to do it... He was so intimidating".

She added: "Before he would come home the children would be happy but when he'd walk through the door everyone would be quiet.

"He had little to say to the children unless he was telling them off about something. Everyone was quiet before he'd go to work, and because of this the kids were very attached to me".

In some respects it is this deep bond with her children that one day led to her escaping the relationship when her daughter insisted she leave.



"My daughter gave me strength by just looking at me... And I realized this had to come to an end".

Yusra received emotional support and counselling but when she came to Family Action it was clear that her journey back to independence was just beginning, as her husband had taken the money.

Without a penny to her name Yusra was also lacking something more fundamental – her confidence.

She added: "When I came to Family Action I couldn't even write my name.

"Mentally and emotionally I was drained and I had no idea what to do or where to go and I couldn't even fill a form out.

"Your worker came in and it was like an angel who had been sent to me to help me get my finances in place - If she was not there then I do not know what I would have done.

"I don't even have the words to explain how important all this was to me".

We helped with getting her welfare applications and child maintenance and also helped her find the confidence to believe she could manage it in future.

Crucially we also arranged to meet her in locations she could access without having to drive.

Yusra is a changed person now and says that her and her children are starting a new chapter together.

"The children are really happy and that fear has gone away where they're able to laugh and giggle and do what they want openly.

"They were so attached to me that it didn't make a difference when he left and they never said "where is dad"?.

Yusra says she is now looking towards studying at college, finding a new job and maybe even learning to drive.

She said: "I have gotten huge amounts of freedom... My life is returning to when I was carefree and independent".

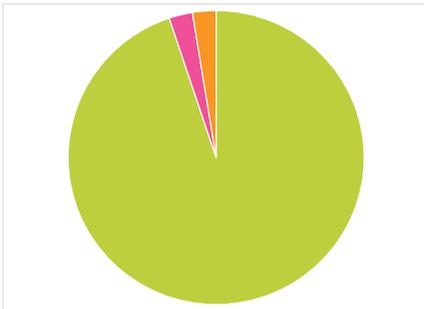
# Client Outcomes

Clients are asked to complete a voluntary questionnaire upon leaving the service regarding how effective it has been for them.

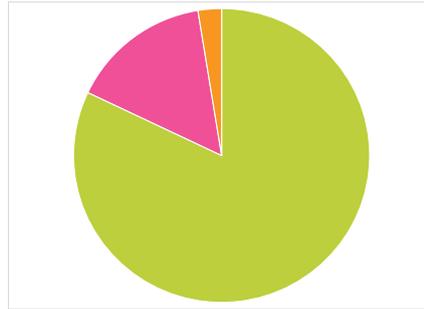
As you can see from the charts below clients who completed the questionnaire between March 2018 and May 2019 overwhelmingly reported improvements in all the key metrics we track. No clients reported that their situation had worsened following working with the service.



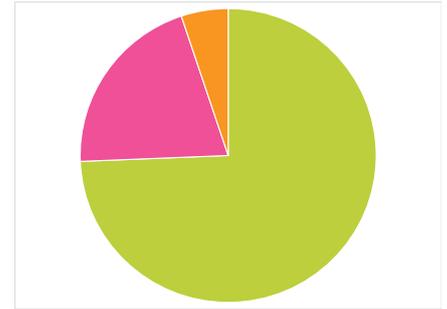
## Living Conditions



## Wellbeing



## Feelings of Safety



Improved

Stayed the Same

Worsened

Not Applicable

## Yasmin

Yasmin left war and heartache in her home country nearly ten years ago– but found no peace in the UK.

Fleeing the country with her child she faced further heartache when an administrative accident separated them, and left them stranded in different countries, with an ocean between them.

Alone and heartbroken, with just a single photo of her lost child, she relied on charity for refuge and food– and suffered numerous refusals of her asylum application

The above situation had a profound effect on her mental health and eventually she was allocated her own accommodation and professional services were put in place to assist her for a short period.

However once the services stopped working with her she found reading and understanding correspondence very difficult, which resulted in her missing a very important assessment relating to her welfare benefits.

She said: "I would receive a letter to attend an assessment but as I didn't understand what the letter was about I would miss the assessment so my rent payments would stop".

"I didn't understand any of it - I was confused about what was going on and why it was happening to me".

As a result her entire income and rent had stopped without her knowledge and she found herself with no money, huge amounts of debt and a possible eviction.

She sought help but due to her poor mental health, confusion and the complexity of the case no one was

willing to assist until one of the mental health services contacted Family Action requesting urgent assistance.

Soon after referral to the service we set about accompanying her to appointments to resolve her financial benefits and unpick the problems around her asylum situation.

It was a huge task that forged a close bond between Yasmin and her support worker

She said: "Whenever I needed her she was always there for me.

"Your worker left no stone unturned to help me - no matter what the weather she has taken the time out to visit me, and I don't know what I would have done without her".

Thanks to the help of Family action and the help of the Red Cross she has now found her child and has even been on a visit to see them, but they are now an adult and she says she prefers to stay in the UK, where the local community can support her.

She added: "I thought thank God my child is alive, but I am still heartbroken that they aren't with me".

She said: "I have been for counselling but even they said they could not help me - nobody understood me because of my mental health and nobody was willing to work with me except Family Action

"You were the only people who went the extra mile for me and did what nobody else would".



## Parveen

After moving to England without speaking the language and with no support network other than her new husband and his family Parveen felt completely isolated.

She says she was happy living with her family abroad but interrupted studies to marry and travel to England.

Although she says her husband was not a bad man he was living with his family - who managed all the family finances, including her husbands, and fought with her constantly over what she was allowed to do.

Initially Parveen wasn't allowed to enter the kitchen, but over time this began to extend to other areas of the house too and she was also prevented from using the phone or contacting her family.

It was an awful situation for the young bride... one which she put up with for around 15 years due mainly to safeguard the two children she had shortly after the marriage began.

She said: "They were fine with the children and because we lived in the family home, they had other children there and mine grew up with other kids... When dinner time came they'd all have dinner together.

"The reason why I lasted that long there was because I thought "okay, they may be horrible with me but the children are happy".

"I put up with a lot for a long time... It was very difficult".

Eventually a doctor supported her to leave the family home after a routine appointment led to her telling her full story, and she moved in with extended family in England on a temporary basis.

She said; "I didn't have a clue what to do or because life was so difficult - it really got me down being let down by everyone.

"I was told to go to a wellbeing center and I went there quite a number of times but didn't tell anyone why I was so depressed.

"One day I was so upset I told someone who worked there what was going on at home and she said "if you need to move out I can help you with that".

She registered for, and was given, housing - but this left

her in a precarious position where she had no furniture and no means of feeding the children other than whatever her extended family could spare.

For Parveen the final straw came when her freezer broke and she couldn't keep the food she had from going bad.

Parveen says she has no idea who most of the people she was speaking to about her situation were but persevered, and took letters she received to her child's school and asked for clear instructions regarding how to resolve the issues they raised. It was as a result of these conversations she first came to work with our service.

When we met her Parveen and the children were sleeping on the floor as they had no beds and very little bedding.

We helped her to manage the benefits the school had helped her apply for, made grant applications for furniture, a cooker and the fridge freezer.

Further grant applications also allowed Parveen to buy a bed and bunkbeds for the children as well as clean and new bedding that she had so desperately needed, and food vouchers to ensure the children had something to eat.

Parveen says that we changed her life, and claims that without the help of Family Action she wouldn't be alive.

She added: "At first I felt let down by everyone and then I came across people who wanted to help.

I didn't even finish education and it's been so difficult for me but with guidance I've got there.

"I have a good feeling now and I want my children to be well educated so they're never in the same situation as me.

"I am really grateful... You may only think you got me a mattress or a fridge but you don't realize the impact you've actually made.

"You don't realize how big of an impact it's made on my life".

Canterbury Advice Service

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