

Report to Health Scrutiny Committee

Women and Disadvantage

Officer Contact: Director of Public Health

Report Author: Amanda Richardson, Policy Manager
Ext. 3173

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Purpose of the Report

This report seeks to outline a number of issues which disadvantage women in Oldham, focusing on women's access to mental health services. It draws upon research undertaken with women experiencing poverty and mental health illness by Oxfam and Inspire Women in 2019/20, together with a brief summary of the emerging national picture in relation to mental health during and post-pandemic.

Recommendations

To consider further research into women's mental health and wellbeing and access to local services; including the collation, analysis and interpretation of any existing data and intelligence; and the engagement of women with lived experience in the development of this evidence base and any future work to respond to the issues it may raise;

To consider further research into the current situation in Oldham in relation to the other key themes raised in the LIFT research: childcare and work, benefits and voice, to understand how the needs of women in the borough can best be met and inequality reduced.

To refer this report and the issues raised to the Cabinet Member for Health and Social Care, the Women's Taskforce and Equality Advisory Group for further consideration.

Women and Disadvantage**1 Background and Policy Context**

- 1.1 Covid-19 has exacerbated existing inequalities within the borough. In response, the Council together with other partners in the Equality Advisory Group, has developed the Equality and Diversity Strategy which aims to tackle inequalities across all ten of the protected characteristics, defined under the Equality Act 2010. Nationally, evidence from organisations such as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and locally, the Council's monthly labour market reports has shown that it is generally the least affluent communities and people on the lowest/fixed incomes who have been hit the hardest by the pandemic. Women, together with younger workers; disabled people; lone parents; people in low-paid employment and people of BAME heritage are included in this group. Often disadvantage is compounded as these cross-cut. Women for example, are more likely to work part-time or in lower paid employment and/or be a lone parent.
 - 1.2 It is now widely recognised and reported that Covid has impacted hugely on mental health and wellbeing nationally – with evidence suggesting that demand for mental health services has increased. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) has monitored the effect of the last year's events on people's personal well-being and mental health. It has found that an estimated one in five adults experienced some form of depression during the coronavirus pandemic, double the pre-pandemic rates.
 - 1.3 Evidence from the ONS Opinions and Lifestyle Survey during the first few months of 2021 suggests that levels of depression remain high. In June 2020, around 19% of adults reported experiencing some form of depression, a similar proportion seen later that year in November. But by the lockdown of early 2021, this has risen to 21%
 - 1.4 Levels were high in younger adults, and young women had particularly high rates, with over four in ten (43%) experiencing some form of depression in the first part of 2021. Symptoms of depression during the pandemic have been more likely to affect some sections of society more, including clinically extremely vulnerable, disabled adults on lower incomes.
 - 1.5 In Oldham feedback from TOG Mind and Positive Steps in 2020 indicated increased demand across all services, especially in relation to counselling services and the impacts of social isolation. There had for example, been a 357% increase in the number of clients seeking links to social networks and TOG Mind saw an increase in requests for "buddy" contacts of 556%.
 - 1.6 Domestic violence too has escalated during the pandemic and more children have been taken into the care of the local authority as financial and other pressure on families increased. In Oldham, this has been most obvious in relation to high risk domestic abuse, reflected in demand in Oldham on the Independent Domestic Violence Adviser (IDVA) team. Average numbers of cases at Multi-Agency Risk Assessment conference (MARAC) doubled from around 20-40 cases every fortnight; and numbers of children on child protection plans following domestic abuse concerns increased 41% between 2019 and 2020.
 - 1.7 The Domestic Abuse Partnership is leading on the refresh of the Domestic Abuse Strategy which, following a needs analysis, identifies areas for development or improvement. There is much ongoing activity to ensure that women experiencing domestic violence receive the support they need including for example re-commissioning of supported housing provision;
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additional support for Independent Domestic Violence Advisers and the development of a range of proposals for funding from the Domestic Abuse Fund.

- 1.8 It is therefore timely as we emerge from the pandemic that we further explore the issues that place women at a particular disadvantage in society, to better understand their nature and scale and, working across the system, take action to reduce and/or mitigate against the impacts of this disadvantage.
- 1.9 Mindful of this, the Leader has recently established a Women's Taskforce to better understand and address the issues facing women in the borough.
- 1.10 The Mayor has also identified her support for tackling women's disadvantage, supporting Inspire Women along with other charities working to promote healthy living through the Mayor's Charities Fund

2 Current Position

- 2.1 Pre- pandemic, research from the LIFT project suggests that women have struggled to access timely and appropriate mental health services and that these experiences have acted to hinder their economic empowerment and progress (Oxfam and Inspire Women LIFT: Women Leading Change project 2019).
- 2.2 The LIFT project aims to tackle poverty and support women's economic empowerment in the UK using a mix of research, programme implementation, and policy influencing. Adopting a co-production and social innovation approach, the project recruited and trained 6 women with lived experience of poverty as Community Researchers who then consulted with other women to explore barriers and solutions to economic empowerment. Four challenges were identified:
- **Mental health:** "There is a lack of support from professionals/my family/my community for me as a woman with mental health issues"
 - **Childcare and work:** "There is no flexible and affordable childcare in Oldham, and I can't find a job that is flexible enough to fit around looking after my family"
 - **Benefits:** "I can't find the information I need on what benefits I'm entitled to and there is no support for me applying for or managing my benefits"
 - **Voice:** "I don't know where I can get my voice heard as a woman in Oldham – there are no opportunities and even when I can contribute no change happens"
- 2.3 In relation to mental health, women reported that they found it difficult to access support which then led to further escalation and additional impacts on their family life; their ability to manage home and work-life, maintain household budgets and access the right benefits and employment support. In turn this created a vicious circle of worsening mental health and increased financial and family worries.
- 2.4 The women identified potential solutions, outlined below and will continue to work with the Community Researchers to develop these as Phase 2 of the project commences in October 2021.
- Creation of a community childcare hub;
 - Training for service providers, professionals and key stakeholders from women with lived experience on mental health sensitivity and sustainable livelihoods approaches (holistic and asset-based approaches to tackling poverty) to the provision of services and support
 - Creation of specific slots for mental health appointments for women with GP's and nurses – ensuring that women receive adequate support
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2.5 Post pandemic, Phase 2 of the LIFT project is scheduled to continue and engage women in co-producing the solutions identified in Phase 1. Outside of that project, the Leader of the Council has established a Women's Taskforce to identify and address the issues facing women; many of which have been amplified by Covid19. The first meeting of the Taskforce took place on 3rd September 2021 where similar issues to those identified in the LIFT project were raised and discussed, those being:

- Democratic engagement/Inclusivity
- Health
- Pay and opportunity
- Finances
- Education and childhood
- Parenting and caregiving
- Gender-based violence and crime
- How the intersection of these issues compounds women's disadvantage

3 Key Issues for Health Scrutiny to Discuss

3.1 There is evidence that women in Oldham, as nationally, face numerous disadvantages. There is an opportunity through for example the Women's Taskforce, Equality Advisory Group and the Oxfam LIFT project, to explore the provision of services for women, and opportunities for example to improve women's access to and experience of mental health support.

3.2 In exploring these it will be important to understand the current provision; gather data and intelligence about the nature and scale of women's mental health and take this into consideration when looking at options for supporting women to access services.

4 Key Questions for Health Scrutiny to Consider

4.1 The Health Scrutiny Committee are asked to consider:

- how they can help to take the actions proposed forward for example by referring to the Women's Taskforce or Equality Advisory Group
- any relevant sources of information, research and intelligence which is available to inform the discussions
- exploration of funding opportunities to tackle women's disadvantage including mental health support

5. Links to Corporate Outcomes

5.1 The proposals contained in the report enable delivery against the Council's Equality and Diversity Strategy; Anti-Poverty Action Plan and, in terms of addressing the impacts of the pandemic, the Council's Covid 19 Recovery Strategy. They also aim to address issues in relation to women's mental health raised at the Women's Taskforce.

5.2 The proposals advocate working with women with lived experience of mental health illness and poverty to develop and find solutions and as such align with the Council's Co-operative Agenda.

5.3 The proposals will contribute to the achievement of the outcomes to improve healthy life expectancy in Oldham detailed in the borough's Locality Plan for Health and Social Care Transformation November 2019 – March 2024.

6 **Additional Supporting Information**

6.1 Inspire Women are represented on the Women's Taskforce and alongside women with lived experience on Oldham's Poverty Truth Commission.

7 **Consultation**

7.1 This report is for Committee's consideration and support only at this stage. Any financial and/or legal implications will be identified once the actions proposed have been approved and taken forward.

8 **Appendices**

8.1 Oxfam LIFT Project Summary 2019

Presentation to Oldham's Women's Taskforce 3 September 2021
