



# ‘They saved my life’ Evaluation of Ascent Advice and Counselling (A&C) and Ascent Advice Plus Evaluation

*Executive Summary*  
2017-2021



# Introduction

**The Ascent Advice & Counselling (A&C) partnership delivers free, confidential and specialist support, advice and counselling for women and girls in London who have experienced domestic and/or sexual violence.** It was originally funded by London Councils in 2013, and has additional funding from the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) since 2019. Capacity was further increased by an emergency grant awarded by the Ministry of Justice to meet increased need during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ascent A&C is one of ten projects delivered under the umbrella of the London Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) Consortium. Ascent A&C delivers the advice and counselling package and is led by Solace Women's Aid, the largest specialist VAWG service in London that works across multiple boroughs. There are 14 organisations within the partnership that provide pan-London specialist counselling and advice services including: one-to-one counselling; one-to-one advice and case work; group work; legal advice;

training and no recourse to public funds assistance. The partnership includes some larger and many smaller 'by and for' organisations that work with minoritised women. It incorporates a range of partner specialisms at the level of language, forms of VAWG and other co-present issues for survivors, such as housing, disability and problematic substance use.

Through additional funding from MOPAC, Ascent Advice Plus has increased capacity in the two advice hubs, extended the time it was possible to work with women, expanded the London legal advice line and incorporated the expertise of four additional Equality & Diversity (E&D) partners specialising in working with deaf and hearing-impaired women, women with learning disabilities and autism, and LGBT+ women.



## Atiya's story

Atiya is Iranian and was referred to Ascent by a health worker. She made contact with them by phone. Atiya was experiencing domestic violence from her husband and needed support about immigration issues, divorce and protection. She received one-to-one casework, counselling and legal advice from a specialist Ascent partner.

*She was really helpful and she totally understood my situation, and she started to help me and give me advice, because at that time I was really feeling bad... she spent lots of her time and she told me I can call her whenever I want, she was happy to listen, and she say "if that helps you to speak, so you can speak to me as much as you want".*

Being able to speak in her own language was very important.

*... my English is not good in general, but especially when I am not feeling good, I can't speak any English. So it's so hard for me to express myself. So speaking in my own language with someone who is proficient was really helpful for me.*

Support was put in place to enable Atiya to leave but, ultimately, she decided to reconcile with her husband. However, she valued the advocacy and support she had received from Ascent, which had improved her mental health.

*As I said, it's my decision and nothing changed because I didn't want it. But what improved, I got help from other services, like social services and I got help from post-natal as well. They help me to improve a little bit my mental health.*

# Methodology

This mixed method evaluation focused on four key areas:



## Mapping

Of the service model, nature of provision, service standards, and data collection and recording systems



## Performance

What the service has delivered and to whom



## Process

How the service is working and is experienced by users, staff and members of the service partnership



## Impact

What the service has achieved and whether it is making a difference, including whether Ascent Advice Plus adds value

Data analysed and gathered for the evaluation included:

Anonymised Ascent A&C and Advice Plus monitoring data for **over 35,000** service users, as reported to funders

Interviews with **14 partner service managers and 3 E&D partners**

Survey data from **94 service users** and interviews with 16

Surveys with **42 frontline staff and 2 focus groups** with advice staff and counsellors

Survey data from **24 external stakeholders** interviews with 2

# Evaluation Findings

## Mapping

Ascent A&C aims to 'increase the safety and aid recovery into independence of women and girls affected by sexual and domestic violence and abuse across London' by providing front-line services and holistic advice, counselling and support.

The Ascent model is a hub and spoke design with two advice hubs (East and West) taking initial referrals, doing a holistic assessment of risk and support needs to identify appropriate ongoing support, and referring on to advice and counselling spokes in the partner agencies and elsewhere. The hubs also provide

immediate advice, information and advocacy support to survivors and support for professionals. Contact can be made by phone or email, and web chat, and referrals into the services can be to/between the hubs or spokes via self-referral or other professionals.

Core services provided across the partnership fall into five main categories and there is specialist BME provision within each type. Services are offered in a range of community languages, such as Urdu, Turkish, Kurdish and Hebrew. During the coronavirus pandemic, the majority of services have been delivered remotely.

## Performance

During 2017-21, Ascent A&C has:



Supported over **30,000** individual women and girls



Provided advice, advocacy and casework support to over **27,000** women and girls



Provided over **52,000** one-to-one counselling sessions and over **3,000** group counselling sessions



Supported **1,800** women with no recourse to public funds, and provided access to housing and living expenses for **84** of these women



Provided training to over **1,000** professionals from **720** organisations

Since the start of the project in 2019, Ascent Advice Plus has:



Answered an additional **3,000** calls to the advice lines



Provided casework to over **900** women and girls



Answered an additional **500** calls to the family law legal line

# Findings

## Service Users

*Making sure I felt heard and supported throughout.*

*Affirmation, comfort and care. It was overwhelmingly wonderful.*

*Was not necessarily what was said, but the understanding and acceptance of what I was saying.*

*They spoke my language and were very kind and sympathetic and put my mind at ease.*

Findings here are based on three surveys with users of the two advice hubs ( $n=15$ ), the London legal advice line ( $n=21$ ) and women accessing support from the partners ( $n=61$ ), and 16 interviews.

The almost 100 service users who took part in this evaluation reported being responded to in a timely manner and having their needs met: there was only one dissenting voice.

Almost all advice hub users surveyed assessed the response as 'extremely' or 'very' helpful and said the advice received had made a difference to them. Empathy, understanding and being heard were key elements that were valued.

All of those using the legal advice line said that it had been helpful for them. Advisors were described as understanding and knowledgeable, and women gained greater awareness and insight into the legal issues they were facing.

Those accessing advice and counselling were overwhelmingly satisfied with the initial response they received. Belief, reassurance and understanding were the most helpful things they described at the point of first contact.

The vast majority of survivors said that their needs had been met

## Key Learnings

The value of pan-London services providing multiple routes into the service was exemplified by the variety of ways survivors used to access it.

Services understand that it is important to be able to catch the moment when women first make contact, and the vast majority of survivors reported a positive initial response.

The majority of survivors received a prompt response and had their needs met.

The words 'changed' or 'saved' my life were often used by women when asked what difference the support had made.

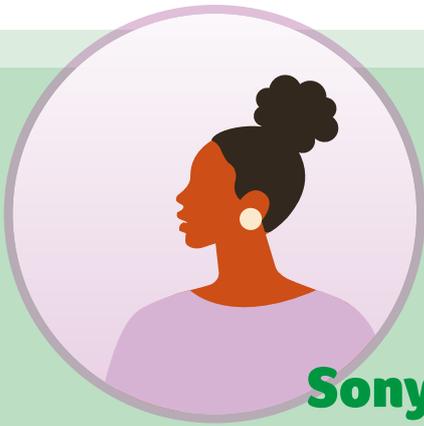
Having access to a service where the workers were from a similar cultural background and/or spoke their mother tongue was important.

Whilst remote access was not seen negatively, some saw it as more convenient, but others, especially minoritised women, preferred face-to-face.

There were unmet needs, most commonly related to wanting the support and/or counselling to last for longer.

Women on waiting lists for counselling recommended some communications whilst they were 'in limbo'.

Several women suggested post-support welfare calls to check on them and as a way for the services to know how much of a difference they had made.



## Sonya's story

Sonya is a mixed heritage woman, with severe dyslexia, and has two children. She was referred to the London legal advice line by a DV organisation in outer South London, and this was the first time she had accessed support. She checked them out online before making contact.

*I had lots of different issues going on at the same time, my housing, domestic abuse, abuse. I'd been left penniless, my husband had cleared everything out, and I had no way, so they gave me all different advice and it was sort of overwhelming at that time.*

Sonya has been in touch multiple times over four years as the complexities of her legal situation have evolved.

*I've used it for a long time, and I still have to use it because I've still got things ongoing, and because of the help that they offer, literally I cannot get that help, I've not been able to get that help anywhere else.*

She spoke at length about the challenges of getting through, even buying a small phone that she could have on constant redial. She noted that it had been easier to get through in the last year, but most difficult initially when she was having to use a friend's phone when hers had been cut off by her partner.

*The first time they were really patient... They let me waffle, because I do waffle, I know I'm not clear in my communications. I think I had post-traumatic stress at that time, and everything was just coming out a million miles... and I had so much that I needed to ask and clarify... I believe they're solicitors, but they were more than that. There's an element of counselling, I guess, that they needed to do to help me to relax, because I get a brain fog once I'm*

*stressed, I can't get my thoughts together the way I need to... they were the last stop for me... I was facing homelessness, all our stuff was cut off. I still was having harassment from him and third parties. I was in the court system, they've been a complete nightmare, losing documents, losing files, demanding documents. I had no legal knowledge to compile these documents, not a clue, and they were reprimanding me. My mother had cancer at the time and chemotherapy, she's elderly, I was trying to support her. They were the only people that helped me sift, not just through the legal stuff... I felt a sense of release. They kind of structured it for me.*

Sonya was having to represent herself in family court and found the process stressful and confusing.

*What they've done would cost thousands and thousands and thousands of pounds with a solicitor. I initially loaned some money to get a solicitor, and they've done way more than any of those solicitors. Just in one conversation you get so much more clarity from them.*

The importance of accurate and quality advice, especially for women who do not have access to Legal Aid cannot be underestimated. Being trapped in endless court appearances and unresolved financial and child contact issues take their toll.

*If I didn't have them, if I didn't have that information, I think I would have folded by now and just walked away. Basically, they've been the driving force to help me continue.*

Sonya was effusive in her praise and also noted how the support had restored her own space for action, which had been severely undermined by her abusive partner. The London legal advice line not only enabled her not to become destitute but to regain a sense of control over her life and that of her children.

*I feel much stronger because... they've helped me believe that I can do that, and helped me practically, emotionally through it, and psychologically given me the strength to say, look you've got that, you've done this, you've done that.*

## Partners

*I think it's a huge, huge difference. This is because before Ascent, it was just kind of different organisations in different parts of London. Ascent brings this support to whole pan-London and Greater London together, it will be easier for women to get the support.*

*The funding... it gives access to black and minority ethnic women, specialist support in particular, and it provides a medium to long-term casework that's required in the majority... because of the intersectionality of the work that we do.*

*The project as a whole I would say is completely underfunded. We are still on the same levels in terms of the money we're getting from when we started eight years ago [...] it's the cost of living, the cost of running the service, salary levels, they've all increased and we have tried to keep with that, we've increased all our salaries even though the funding hasn't increased, so that it is actually costing us money to run some elements of this.*

Interviews were conducted with all 14 delivery managers and three of the four E&D partners. Partners found the Ascent A&C partnership to be working well, with partnership structures and meetings operating effectively, and the lead partner viewed positively.

The benefits of the partnership included: access to specialist support; sharing knowledge and learning; enhanced sustainability; providing greater access and reach.

Some of the challenges faced by the partners were: the increasingly complex needs that women and girls are presenting with; time limits on sessions; for all partners, but particularly the by and for organisations, the intensive nature of the casework; borough allocations; and targets.



## Key Learnings

There has been a notable increase in the complexity of cases presenting to Ascent necessitating high intensity crisis work. This is having an impact on practitioner capacity and workloads and wellbeing. Greater recognition is needed, including through funding, of the complexity of women's initial presentation to Ascent, as well as the complex and extended nature of the work with minoritised women. It is also important to recognise this in the context of ever decreasing local resources.

There should be greater acknowledgement of the resource implications for 'by and for' organisations of delivering this type of work.

Funding levels of the project as a whole are often insufficient to cover partners' core costs, meaning that in some cases they are subsidising the work. Some reflection on the prescribed nature of the borough-level targets is needed in relation to the locations and expertise of partners and meeting the needs of service users.

The allocation of boroughs does not fully take account of where minoritised communities are located and needs reconsidering.

## Frontline Staff

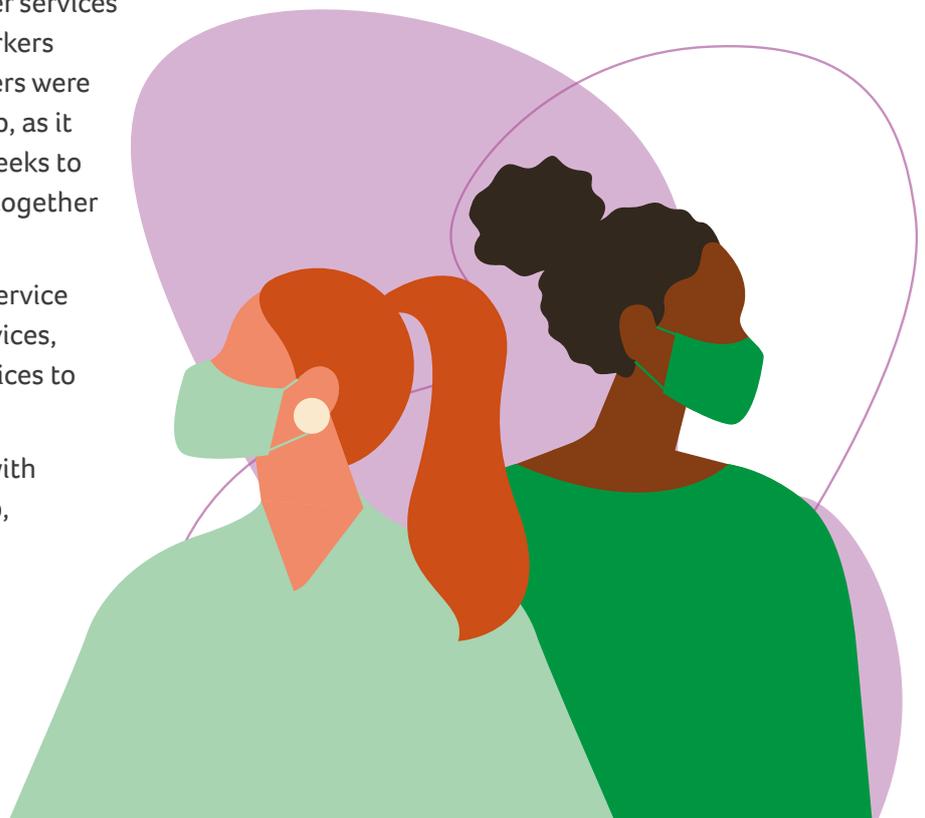
*I see it as a large network of specialist workers who are working together to meet the needs and wishes of an incredibly vast and diverse city. I have endless admiration and respect for the women who work together to make this possible.*

*It feels valuable to be part of a group of organisations all pushing in the same direction and seeking the same end for our callers. It is a shame that we are not able to meet the demand but the project is a valuable way of working together and ensuring women are supported in as many ways as possible.*

Findings here are based on a survey distributed among frontline staff in each of the partner services and two focus groups (one with advice workers and one with counsellors). Frontline workers were positive about the Ascent A&C partnership, as it reaches women and girls across London, seeks to address their needs and involves working together towards a common goal.

Most said they felt part of a pan-London service because they were working with other services, operating as a network and providing services to women and girls London-wide.

84% reported very positive relationships with other organisations within the partnership, and all those in a position to comment described having a good and supportive relationship with the lead partner.



## Key Learnings

Frontline practitioners confirmed that women are presenting to Ascent services with increasingly complex needs, particularly featuring mental health and suicidality, that are beyond the scope of their remit and skills.

Many said that limited capacity meant they could not deal with the level of demand and there were aspects of women's needs they could not address.

Working within the partnership gave staff a clear sense of being part of a network with a common goal, and the majority felt part of a pan-London service.

Relationships between staff in partner organisations and with the lead partner were described extremely positively.

## Stakeholders

*I think it's vital to have specialist agencies such as those within the partnership to try to ensure that all women have access to support. I think agencies such as those in the partnership are essential.*

*It complements them by enabling more women who may not access mainstream services to be supported. It means that women are less likely to face the additional barriers they may have with mainstream services, e.g., language or cultural barriers.*

Twenty-four stakeholders took part in an online survey about Ascent A&C.

Ascent A&C services were seen by stakeholders as adding further options to what is available locally and complementing local services, bringing skills around VAWG, language and working with minoritised groups that mainstream services lacked.



## Key Learnings

Virtually all stakeholders were aware of Ascent A&C, the advice hubs and the specialist E&D partners.

Stakeholders appreciated Ascent A&C's role in responding to VAWG, particularly their skills and specialisms around responding to VAWG, community languages and working with minoritised women.

They saw Ascent services as complementing what is available locally.

Stakeholders commented that services had long waiting lists, but they may not fully appreciate the borough allocations and targets.

## *Ascent Advice & Counselling*

Ascent A&C worked with over 30,000 new service users, predominantly women and girls between 2017 and 2021. In virtually all cases, Ascent A&C targets were met or exceeded, particularly those related to options for exiting prostitution, self-esteem and confidence, health and wellbeing, and access to legal advice/understanding of the law.

84 women were supported through the NRPF destitution fund to access safe housing with subsistence.

An average of 8,550 guides produced by the legal advice line have been downloaded each month during the first quarter of 2021, and they trained 67 external professionals.

The two outcome measures for external training participants were both achieved, indicating the quality of the training provided by partners.

## *Ascent Advice Plus*

For all but two measures, targets for Ascent Advice Plus were exceeded, especially with regard to: increased understanding of abuse and options to report, and improved health and wellbeing.

All three staff measures, which related to feeling supported, that training received was appropriate for their role and that they were making a positive impact to those they are supporting, were achieved fully.



# Recommendations

*The following recommendations relate to each sector involved in the evaluation.*

## **General**

Findings show the value and impact of the pan-London approach to supporting women and girls affected by VAWG.

It is clear that the specialist Ascent A&C partnership is hugely successful in supporting a diverse range of women and girls across the whole of London, irrespective of postcode.

## **Service users**

Ascent reaches a huge number of women and girls. However, there is clearly greater demand for all forms of the support currently offered. The partnership cannot meet these with the existing resources. Any review of funding should also take account of the impact of Covid-19 on levels of VAWG and the complexity of cases presenting.

Although the extended time limits available through Ascent A&C and Advice Plus are welcomed, there should be greater flexibility and resources to extend further in specific circumstances – for example, where there is a shift/breakthrough towards the end of counselling, where a leave to remain decision has not been made, or where a legal process is ongoing.

Learning from the experience of the pandemic should be integrated to enhance the range of support options available to survivors. Remote access was valued by a proportion of service users.

## **Partners**

Whilst it is important to monitor service provision borough-to-borough in order to ensure access and take-up across London, greater flexibility is required. Overall 'London' or 'regional' targets for the partnership would be preferable to the existing fixed and somewhat arbitrary borough-level targets.

Future funding applications should revisit delivery budgets in line with real terms cost increases and salary levels should align more with statutory levels.

Funding formulas and time limits should be considered in light of the longer time scales needed to work with issues like child sexual abuse, no recourse to public funds and minoritised women more generally.

There should be more reflection time to explore and share the practice-based knowledge in the partnership. We propose that this be framed as Ascent being a community of practice to facilitate learning.

## **Frontline staff**

Greater resourcing is needed to address the volume of demand for support among women in London.

The impact on staff wellbeing of increasingly intensive and complex cases they are dealing with should be monitored.

Practice-based meetings within the partnership are vital for ensuring staff are supported and have access to a community of practice and these should continue.

## **Stakeholders**

The partnership as a whole puts a huge effort into promoting Ascent services in every borough, but there is always scope to increase the profile of it at the borough level, as individual stakeholders will move on and local contexts may change.

An illustration of six women of various ethnicities and ages, shown in profile from the chest up. They are wearing different styles of clothing, including a purple top, a green top, a black headscarf, and a white headscarf. The background is a light purple gradient.

**solace**

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This report was researched and written by Jo Lovett and Professor Liz Kelly from the Child and Women Abuse Studies Unit at London Metropolitan University

To protect our service users,  
names & photos of service users  
have been changed.

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