



# Empowering girls and young women through Project 1325

## Final evaluation report: executive summary

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# Executive summary

The evaluation of WomenCentre's Project 1325 took place from November 2017 until March 2020. Drawing upon previous work in the WomenCentre, and a commitment to women-centred, flexible and holistic ways of working in keeping with the WomenCentre model, the evaluation was grounded in the principles of feminist research approaches and participatory methodologies. The evaluation utilised a co-productive, active participation approach to explore issues collectively with the girls and young women (herein: young women) who came to Project 1325 to evaluate the Project from their perspectives and to centre their needs from and experiences during the Project. This approach to the evaluation facilitated an organic process of learning, exploration and reflection to inform Project 1325's work as it progressed.<sup>1</sup>

## Aims of the evaluation and methods of data collection

Project 1325's evaluation had four aims, which were to:

- (1) Empower young women to understand and address the challenges they face
- (2) Centre the voices of young women in learning and change
- (3) Assess and evidence the effectiveness of the early, preventative interventions of Project 1325
- (4) Bring about organisation systems change based upon learning from the research

The evaluation collected data with a variety of individuals and groups to address the evaluation's aims. The evaluation began with **five focus groups with young women** who were ongoing cases, shortly followed by **13 observations of one-to-one support sessions** with young women and the Caseworkers through their journeys on Project 1325 and **four retrospective interviews** with young women whose cases were closed. The evaluation then collated **quantitative case records for 117**

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**closed cases, and conducted two group interviews with WomenCentre staff, and three one-to-one interviews with WomenCentre operational staff.**

### Summary of evaluation findings

The evaluation of Project 1325 produced learning on several key aspects of the Project.

#### The young women's needs, support and outcomes

The young women presented to Project 1325 with myriad needs, dominated by mental health issues (79% of the young women), followed by problems in family relationships (71%), low confidence and self-esteem (64%), experiences of interpersonal/ sexual violence and sexual exploitation (53%), and school issues (incl. being excluded from school and not in education, training and employment) (42%). In the main, the young women presented to Project 1325 with more than one issue, and on average four to six issues. The young women themselves reported that they needed someone to speak with above all, and to do so in a safe environment where they knew that they were not being judged. The young women also noted that they needed to develop coping skills and resilience to address their problems, while emotional support dominated their own framing of their needs.

Project 1325 worked with young women in a variety of ways, comprising trauma-informed and emotional support (83% of the young women), support for mental health problems (72%), developing healthy relationships (68%), building confidence and self-esteem (56%), and supporting young women through multi-agency work (50%). Generally, the young women were supported in more than one way and received, in the main, three to six types of support during the Project. The young women valued all the support that they received on Project 1325, and particularly being able to talk openly with Caseworkers about their problems. They also valued developing strategies to cope and knowing that their support was not time-limited while also knowing that they and their needs were centred in the Project and that they could inform the process of work at all points.

The outcomes from Project 1325 took several forms. The main outcomes of the work were concerned with improvements in mental health (88% of the young women), healthier relationships (n=62%), engagement with education, training or employment (50%), and reduced risky behaviours (26%). The young women achieved, in the main, between three and five outcomes from the support and

themselves reported various intra- and inter-personal, and professional, outcomes and improvements from the Project.

### The young women's Project 1325 journeys

Project 1325's support for young women was in-depth, holistic and tailored to the young women's needs and what they wanted from the support. It focused primarily on empowering the young women to address their needs and to make the changes that they wanted to bring about in their lives.

The Project's support utilised the WomenCentre's women-centered and trauma-based ways of working. The Caseworkers and the young women worked together to help the young women to identify the issues in their lives, how they wanted to address them, and the progress and outcomes that they had achieved. The support then involved the Caseworkers helping the young women to overcome their issues by helping them to develop (or regain) their agency and independence by reinforcing their self-worth and decisions, to build resilience by helping to them release skills and capacities for coping, to celebrate progress and change with the young women by reassuring them of their own achievements in naming and knowing change and making changes, and to support the young women to engage in a process of ongoing reflection and learning in their lives.

Project 1325's support enabled the young women to become empowered and to 'reclaim their own stories', while the young women's journeys through the Project formed part of their wider lives and contexts. Through a process of reflection and learning, the Caseworkers supported the young women to recognise and name turning points (or key moments) in their journeys that enabled them to move on from past experiences or to begin a new stage of their recovery.

Project 1325's theory of change captured the young women's journeys in their own words and from their own perspectives, beginning with their understandings of their starting points (presenting needs for which they wanted support), moving through their empowerment journeys (for example, regaining agency) and their naming and knowing of turning points, and their understandings of the changes and empowerment that they experienced during their journeys. Applying the theory of change to some of the young women's Project 1325 journeys underscored the personalised and women-centred support for each young woman that took place in Project 1325.

The effectiveness of the Project was illustrated by the successful outcomes in individual case studies and in the range of outcomes recorded in the quantitative case record data. The effectiveness of the Project highlights the importance of early, preventative work with young women in the age group 13 to 25.

### Learning from Project 1325 in the WomenCentre

Project 1325's theory of change aligned with the WomenCentre's women-centred and holistic ways of working by focusing on the young women and developing the support journey around their needs. The Project differed, however, from much of the WomenCentre's previous work because of its work with younger women (aged 13-18) who benefitted particularly from intensive, tailored one-to-one emotional support and relational work with the Caseworkers.

The Project was rewarding for all the staff involved in the work, but it was also challenging because of issues with capacity and resourcing. As the Project developed and became more widely known, requests and referrals for support increased and the waiting lists for the Project lengthened. The open-ended criteria, delivery and timescales of the Project, which were fundamental to the support, increased demand considerably.

Key differences existed between the two WomenCentre sites that ran Project 1325, which brought about necessary variations in delivering the Project (for example, in multi-agency delivery). Rather than trying to match delivery across the sites, however, the Project developed organically across sites and best practice was shared between sites.

Co-creating the Project with the young women was challenging because of the difficulties in engaging the young women in this form of input and because of the pressures at the beginning of the Project to begin to provide support to the young women as soon as possible. However, the individualised Project support was always co-created with the young women using women-centred trauma-informed models of working. Utilising social media was also challenging during the Project because of its demands on resources and because engaging with social media as part of a project's strategy was new for the WomenCentre's staff. Developing co-production of all aspects of project work, and utilising social media efficiently and effectively, became aspirations for new work.

In terms of future work, the learning from the evaluation indicated that similar projects should be expanded to include younger women (aged 11-12) to provide support at the key transition point of leaving primary school and starting high/ secondary school. In addition, staff agreed that the second key transition point of moving adolescence to adulthood should also be a focus of future work.

Finally, the staff expressed an ambition for developing the collective work that had been led by the young women in Project 1325 and had evolved organically out of the support during the Project, particularly in terms of social gatherings and engaging in peer support work around issues relevant to young women and girls.

### Summary of recommendations

The following are the main recommendations to emerge from Project 1325:

- ▶ *Frontline work:* To ensure that as many young women as possible receive support, and that the flexibility of support is maintained, projects such as Project 1325 need to be better resourced, particularly in terms of frontline casework.
- ▶ *Transition points:* Resources need to be invested in supporting young women at key transition points in their lives when they move from primary to high/ secondary school (aged 11-12) and from adolescence to adulthood (aged 18).
- ▶ *Managing the Project:* Future projects could consider how to manage and oversee the project effectively and efficiently in terms of the best use of staff resources.
- ▶ *Co-production with young women:* Time and resources need to be built into the beginning of projects to ensure that young women and staff are supported in the process of co-producing the project (aims, support materials, promotion materials, etc.).
- ▶ *Working with young women:* Future projects should consider how to support young women to come together collectively (for social events and/ or to support each other) and how these collectives might be resourced.
- ▶ *Social media strategy:* Time and resources also need to be built into projects so that staff, working with young women, are supported to devise a social media strategy that meets the aims of the project and serves the needs of the project (e.g., reaching young women).

# EMPOWERING GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN THROUGH PROJECT 1325

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