

Swindon Women's Aid director says: 'We can support you'

In April Swindon Women's Refuge, part of Swindon Women's Aid, marked its first anniversary in its new premises, providing self-contained accommodation for women who have suffered domestic abuse. Perhaps less well known is the provision of children's services and outreach support for women and men. Juliet Platt talked to Swindon Women's Aid director Olwen Kelly who has been in the role since September 2012, coming from a civil service background and most recently working for the Home Office as a regional crime and drug abuse advisor.

Swindon's commitment to reducing the incidence of domestic abuse can be seen in the statistics and more importantly the way lives of women, children and indeed men are damaged.

Commenting on the importance of the Refuge in Swindon, Olwen said: "While the national average of reported domestic abuse is only 25 per cent of violent crime; in Swindon that figure is more like 28.5 per cent, most probably thanks to the proactivity and zero tolerance attitude of local police.

"Thanks to the efforts of Swindon Borough Council, the Swindon Refuge has Beacon status nationally and is one of the largest facilities in the country, with 22 units, some with three bedrooms, and an emergency room. This means that we are able to take in abused women and their children, male or female, up to 18 years of age.

"In the past 12 months we've worked with over 400 individuals in the community and over 100 high

risk individuals. It's very satisfying working with victims from day one and seeing their transition to independence."

Explaining the nature of domestic violence Olwen said: "There doesn't have to be physical violence involved, nor is it something that is more prevalent within certain demographics than others. Domestic abuse can be emotional and psychological too,

such as the male partner having sole control over all the money, denying the woman any independence at all.

"Domestic abuse is a highly complex issue, and there is still a stigma attached to reporting it to the police, not to mention the domino effect on the partner's job, the mortgage, and the children. It is terrifying for many women to confront and there needs to be more done to improve how it's dealt with in the courts and in society."



Convinced of the need to take preventative measures to solve the long term issue of domestic violence, Olwen and her team have begun a new programme for 11 to 18 year olds in schools and colleges across Swindon, focussing on healthy relationships, and guiding young people to be more discerning about what they read in the media and how they respond.

This will be further developed during the Autumn. She said: "Domestic

violence is not a phenomenon of the older generations. The number of abusive relationships is still emerging with young people between the ages of 16 to 25 being the ones most at risk, due largely to the way relationships are portrayed in the media."

Swindon Women's Aid is already delivering training for professionals such as GPs and teachers, on how to identify domestic violence cases, the impact on children and the

type of behaviour that manifests as a result of abuse in the home. Olwen explained: "Professionals need a different level of knowledge and awareness to get to the root causes of different behaviours, rather than just reacting to the symptoms."

Swindon Women's Refuge operates a 24 hour helpline which women or concerned parents or friends can contact confidentially on 01793 610610.

www.swindonwomensaid.org