

This year we are pleased to share that our school charity is Swindon Domestic Abuse Support Service (SDASS). This is an amazing organisation, which has been running every day since it was set up in 1974, to help a wide range of people who have experienced acts of domestic abuse. I had the pleasure of meeting with the charity's CEO, Joanna Eamey and the Chair of Trustees, Nicky Alberry. They generously gave their time to share some insight in to how the charity runs and explain the sort of help that they provide.

As both a school and as a year group, we feel very strongly about the empowerment of women and the importance of raising awareness of significant issues in the safety of their everyday lives. Therefore, we decided to support SDASS this year, as they display key messages that we believe deserve full promotion, as well as raising awareness and providing support for victims of domestic abuse.

Domestic abuse is a key area in which women have the predominance of persecution, as 1 in 4 women in the UK are affected by domestic abuse. The work of SDASS has a massively positive impact especially in our local area, and this means we can work with a charity whilst simultaneously aiding the local community as well as contributing to the solution to a national problem. Although they have a key role in protecting women, men, and children from situations of domestic abuse, they also offer support and guidance to all members of the community in a variety of ways.

The charity works with local police and council members as well as hospitals and GPs to allow the people in need of assistance to be referred through legitimate and safe networks. This is a key part of their organisation as it allows their users to maintain full anonymity. The health services play a vital part in the process, as receiving treatment is a very personal thing, and the staff of SDASS and hospitals can have one-on-one contact without the person feeling like there is a threat in the room. This also means any partners are not involved, maintaining the safety for everyone. As well as this, SDASS are starting to use more methods to reach out to the community. One key focus is on local businesses and communities; training staff to identify signs which may indicate domestic abuse as well as training them in the appropriate follow up actions if there is a person they are concerned about. This promotes an earlier response and seek for the help which can exponentially reduce damage to their life and other lives.

This work is expanded into the local schools and colleges across the organisation, including all members from students to the caretakers. The work is tailored to specific groups to allow the maximum awareness possible, as well as not overloading young people with scary details. This promotes an earlier education on the key topic of domestic abuse, allowing for future generations to have a rounded view and be well prepared for what they may encounter. As well as this, they also reflect that, although the typical view of domestic abuse is that it primarily affects families and adult relationships, this is not always the case. The term Domestic Abuse legally only applies to those over 16, however SDASS also recognise younger victims. There are still prominent levels of abuse within teenage relationships which can put one member at a great threat. This allows them to learn how they can get help and that there is someone present to help them if they need. SDASS have a specialised team for targeting young communities and encouraging them to start the conversation around domestic abuse as well as decreasing the stigma that has been created around the subject. It can also stretch to children who have been in a family environment where domestic abuse is present, giving them an opportunity to talk about it. This prevents them from internalising their trauma and from feeling the life-altering effects it may have on them once they have grown up and in their future relationships.

A proportion of the charity's efforts is dedicated to a refuge. This is a home for women and their children who are victims of domestic abuse. It was a purposely designed building for domestic abuse victims to enable them to have a safe home and place to recover emotionally and financially from the position that was enforced upon them. The original refuge was opened in 1975, with the current centre having been opened in 2012, and has been running and open every day since then. As there is only limited space in the refuge, they must prioritise certain people based on two key factors. The first is risk, meaning those who have the largest risk imposed upon

them have priority for a space in the refuge, as the main goal is safety and rehabilitation of the victims. To assess the risk, there is a scale where once your risk factor surpasses 12, your situation is considered high risk. However, not all residents surpass the 12 marks of risk as it depends on each individual case. As well as this, they look at whether it is locationally sensible, as if it is too close to the perpetrator, there is a higher chance of an accidental encounter. This shelter provides these families with flats, meaning there is a separation of different families and giving mothers and children different bedrooms. Separation is a key element to allow privacy and aid the victim to gain as much normality as possible. The shelter is in high demand, and it alarmed me to hear that the refugee could be filled three to four times over from our local community alone.

SDASS also provide other services for anyone who needs them. These involve group and one-to-one counselling, advice, and support. This helps emotional repair as well as aiding the effort to get victims back in to having their lives be as normal as possible. In these services they provide financial support, safety planning, as well as a holistic plan, allowing them to develop any elements that may have been affected such as their career and social lives. They also carry out workshops, such as recovery tool kits, which allows victims to find methods to help them to deal with what has happened and learn coping mechanisms.

Both the charity and refuge aim to allow people to develop a long-term plan and work with them to achieve their goals. These plans vary from case to case, whether it is having moved out to live on their own independently or to wanting to start up a business, SDASS provide services to support them through all of it with no time limit or measure of when they should stop. They have many programmes which can work with a wide range of people and cover a range of areas, from training people with scenario specific skills, to raising awareness. SDASS also run an amazing programme where they work with perpetrators to allow them to develop an understanding of the distress they may have caused, as well as learning in how to properly function in a relationship. This is an amazing and rare programme, and it aims to help the perpetrators to not repeat their actions and to prevent them from modelling them to their friends and family, aiming to reduce the culture of domestic violence. As well as this valuable service they run a 24-hour helpline both for current clients and anyone seeking help; it allows an immediate comfort and support to be present for all people which can help the mental wellbeing of all involved. The active listening and rationalised responses can supply a valuable service to everyone. This, although it is a costly and logistically demanding service to run, is such a vital part of what SDASS do and they dedicate a whole team to support this at all costs.

As well as their programmes, they work in partnership with many companies across the UK to promote domestic abuse awareness and to provide services to all that need them. One amazing example of this is the work with GWR. The Women's Aid Federation of England worked with GWR to launch the Rail to Refuge scheme allowing victims to travel across the country to find a place of refuge. As part of this, SDASS deliver training to GWR staff on how to spot signs and help victims of domestic abuse. This is a huge movement forward in creating accessibility to services and interconnecting a variety of places in the UK. Through this scheme, they have had people coming to the refuge from Ireland with five children in complete safety. This shows that it stretches wide across the UK to allow people the best chance to recover.

SDASS also work with a variety of people to raise funds for their charity, including large national corporations like the National Lottery who donate funds, as well as Children in Need. These are national donation sources, but they also receive local donations, both food and money. The supermarkets such as the Tesco in Royal Wootton Bassett and the ASDA in south Swindon, donate food through the donation bin at the door. As well as this they have donations from fundraisers, such as the local fire station doing a sponsored tire flip, which raised £4000 for the charity. They also have other sources of funds from the government of which they get a set amount each year, as well as from their shop, in which they sell donated clothes and other merchandise. These donations are vital to allow SDASS to run as well as it does currently, and to allow support to be accessible to all those who need it.

In their 49 years, there has been a pattern prevalent as to when the highest numbers of cases are reported and to when there is a reduction in the number of people who need help. The annual cycle indicates a reduction of reports in the lead up to Christmas. SDASS think that this is due to these victims wanting their children to have a normal, undisrupted Christmas and do not want to ruin it by leaving at that time of the year. However, once Christmas is over there is generally an influx of people as they have crossed through from the holidays and there is less tying them down. As well as this, it is thought that domestic violence increases over the Christmas period due to the busy and costly nature of the holiday. This however cannot be helped. SDASS also told me about the effect men's football has on domestic abuse. This is due to the high emotion and intense devotion to the sport causing angry mis-expressed outbreaks of violence toward their partner as a misplaced aggressive act. This was a particular worry for the charity last year as both the World Cup and Christmas overlapped causing a potentially worsened situation. The cost-of-living crisis is also thought to be having negative effects on domestic abuse as well. The charity tried to prepare in advance, and spread awareness of the issues that may occur, whilst stressing their presence and services to the local community.

On a more positive note, since the pandemic there has been a huge increase in spreading the message and talking about domestic abuse in a realistic context. This can be seen through television shows as well as radio programmes such as *The Archers*. These reflect themes such as entering domestically abusive relationships, and how the acts can be seen as caring and insignificant sacrifices, such as "I don't want you going out as it is not safe." This reflects the abuser using coercive control to torment and trick their victims. This publicity of the signs of domestic abuse and how it can be disguised as coming from a caring side has had an impact on numbers. This movement took place before Covid, meaning the statistical comparison is before and after. Although there has been an increase in domestic abuse cases, there has been a reduction of the time spent in them before seeking help. Before the pandemic, it was on average eight years before someone would seek help in a domestically abusive relationship, while now it is down to six, and is still on a downward trajectory. People are spending less time in the harmful environment perhaps limiting the trauma and impact it has on them.

SDASS have an amazing team who work together to help people in unfortunate situations make a new life for themselves and experience freedom and independence again. This team has an unusual board of trustees in contrast to many other domestic abuse charities as there are men on the board. This, however, is viewed as a strength as these men are keen advocates to prevent domestic violence and have vital input into the everyday running of the charity. As well as that, their amazing CEO, who I met with, is an experienced professional spending most of her working life in the charity sector, and spent the past nine years specifically devoted to domestic abuse. She works tirelessly to run and coordinate SDASS, and clearly cares for the cause immensely.

SDASS undertake incredibly vital work in our local community by supplying refuge and services for all who need them. As a school, we took part in White Ribbon Day which was the wearing of a white ribbon to show support to those who have been abused. The day nationally also encouraged men to vow to never commit condone or stay silent about domestic abuse. As well as this we provided the charity with some cakes for their stall at the Marlborough market to help them raise some money. We are proud to be supporting them in 2023 and to be a part of a national cause that we deeply believe in.