



Ascend Domestic Abuse Service

Annual Report 2019

Introduction History/Mission Objectives of the Service

Ascend Domestic Abuse Service offers confidential support services and information to women who have or are experiencing domestic abuse in their intimate relationships. Services include one to one support, a helpline, court accompaniment, information and outreach support. The service is available throughout North Tipperary including Roscrea, Nenagh and Thurles.

Ascend's primary purpose is to ensure that women have support and information about the dynamics of domestic abuse and of relevant services available so that they can make informed choices. The Service is committed to ensuring that every woman will live a life without coercive control and reclaim the power to fulfil her potential. Ascend Services work collectively and collaboratively with women, families, communities and agencies to promote a clearer societal acknowledgement of the unacceptability of domestic abuse. Ascend aims to put the safety of women and children at the centre of our work, to empower women in their lives, and to advocate on their behalf where appropriate.

Governance arrangements

The service is an initiative of North Tipperary Development Company (NTDC).

North Tipperary Development Company is a local development company responsible for the delivery of a range of rural enterprise, social inclusion, and community development initiatives in the Tipperary North County area.

The purpose of NTDC is "to act as a voluntary, non-profit making, private limited company with a mission to promote social inclusion, to promote economic development, increase employment and enterprise opportunities and promote wider participation in voluntary activity for the people of the area".

Services Offered by Ascend

Ascend supported two hundred and seven women in 2019. Cases are reviewed every quarter and cases closed as deemed appropriate. One hundred and twenty five new clients met with the service in 2019. Most new clients seek information on their options, about court, housing and children's supports. Many women require more understanding in relation to the issue and wish to develop their coping strategies.

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Ascend offers a confidential listening and information telephone service where women have the opportunity to discuss their circumstances. The ADAPT Services Helpline number is available on the Ascend answering machine for clients who need support outside of our working hours. All calls are responded to in a timely fashion. In 2019, Ascend offered telephone support on 1,576 occasions; a substantial increase on last year (1,247-2018) and received 93 calls on their helpline number. There were 321 outreach appointments and 1,093 contacts (compared to 409 contacts in 2018) made with professional regarding clients' issue. We accompanied clients on 54 occasions (excluding court) to meet with professionals such as Barnardos, Child Protection, Court Clerk, Estate Agents, Family Support, Gardaí, GP's, Housing, Legal Aid, Solicitors, and Social Work. Women who accessed Ascend were born in countries as diverse as Poland, Hungary, UK, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, USA and Slovakia.

If women wish to discuss their situation in person they can make an appointment with Ascend to meet anywhere in North Tipperary. Ascend staff meet service users at an appropriate safe location outside the service users' home.

Ascend provides emotional support to women with a support service that listens to them and believes them. The Service helps women get clarity on their situation. Service users are given information about their options. Every service user receives a safety and risk assessment with specific questions. A safety plan is created in consultation with them. This is done either in person or initial contact can be made over the phone.

If Ascend staff has concerns about a woman's safety or that of their children, they make a referral to specialised services within the Tusla. Staffs at Ascend do not provide legal advice or counselling services. Ascend also accompany women and participate in child welfare conferences and other relevant meetings as requested by service users and agencies.

Ascend makes referrals to TLC Kidz, Barnardos, counselling services, Pieta House and any other relevant agencies according to the service users' needs. They also provide support with regard to the following agencies: referral to a refuge, or alternative temporary housing through Social Work, Social Welfare, Housing and homeless services, Child Protection, Gardaí, Legal Aid, St. Vincent de Paul and many others. Ascend staff liaise with an average of four professionals per case whilst also providing clients with many other interagency contacts to explore their options.

Ascend offers service users the opportunity to participate in a Personal Development course where they can meet other women in a similar situation.

Court Accompaniment

Ascend offer a Court accompaniment service through which the staff:

- i. accompany the service user in court

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- ii. can give Women a clear understanding of the procedures of court
- iii. accompany Women to appointments with solicitors at service users request
- iv. explain the different court orders to women
- v. explain what is required of women by the Courts when Orders are granted
- vi. provide on-going service to women throughout their court history and follow-up

Ascend supports women in court on matters relating to domestic violence, maintenance, child access, separation and divorce.

One hundred and fifty-seven clients were in receipt of court accompaniment services in 2019 (a substantial increase on our figure of 100 last year). This could be due to the new Domestic Violence Act coming into force on 1st January 2019. There were 61 court accompaniment occasions from January to December with on average 2-3 women being accompanied on any one occasion. Women attended court for a range of needs including applying for protection, safety and barring orders, and maintenance and child access. The Service continues to engage with solicitors and court staff to get better outcomes for clients.

Court work continues to be a vital and critical support to women accessing the Ascend service. Service Users have given personal testimonies of the value they put on this service.

“You would really want to know what you are at in court, I am so glad ye were there to explain and help.”

Under the Victim’s Directive clients of Ascend have access to a separate room for District and Circuit Court Hearings in Nenagh and Thurles Courthouse whilst waiting for their hearing/applications. A support person can also go into the courtroom with the service user to remain or not on the judge’s discretion

Many service users spoke to the value they placed on Ascend’s Court accompaniment support at the Speak Up Café, 2013.

Data collection

Ascend has a data collection mechanism in place but is looking forward to a more streamlined data collection system to reflect the diversity and trends of their work and help determine future direction. Databases are being developed nationally and regionally and Ascend is awaiting feedback from them to determine which is most suitable for their needs. A record is kept of every client engaged with by the Service.

Staff Development

Ascend is committed to providing the best service to women accessing the service and all staff are offered opportunities to participate in training and development to meet that objective.

In 2019 the following training and development was undertaken by Ascend staff:

- Understanding Self Harm Awareness Training (HSE) – Mulgrave Street Limerick

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- Equality, Diversity & Human Rights Workshop, Safe Ireland
- Mindfulness and staying well staff day, NTDC
- Strategic Planning, NTDC
- TLC Kidz Training, 3 days – Thurles
- Tusla- Children First, Foundation Training
- Safe Ireland- Coercive Control Training Advisory Group
- Screening and discussion on ‘Resilience – the Biology of Stress and Science of Hope’
- DSGBV- Awareness and Response
- National Conference Exploring D and S Violence Issues Impacting Traveller and Roma Communities
- Child Protection: Domestic Homicide Review and Risk Assessment and Management Processes for Police Responses to DV
- Court Accompaniment Training
- ASIST Training (HSE) – University of Limerick
- Mid-West Forensic Medical Examination Service/Rape and Sexual Assault Seminar
- SAOR – Training, Naas (HSE)
- Hidden Shame – The Learning Curve Institute, Dublin
- Equality, Diversity & Human Rights Workshop, Safe Ireland
- Mindfulness and staying well staff day, NTDC
- In House Website Training (refresher) Mark O’Leary
- Two-day training in Adapt Domestic Abuse Service.
- Level 2 Child Protection Training in Limerick.
- Assist Tune Up – (HSE)
- Coercive Control workshop
- Safeguarding Vulnerable Persons Awareness course.
- First Aid
- Assist Tune Up

Ascend has attended the following conferences this year.

- Launch of Tipperary and Young People’s Service Committee – Plan and LGBT Need’s Analysis Report
- Infant Mental Health Symposium – Clonmel
- The National ‘Community of Practice’ events hosted by Barnardos National Project on Childhood Domestic Abuse.
- 16 Days of Action Event – UHL Hospital
- Safe Ireland Conference “Safe Home, Safe Communities”– Westport
- Sexual Violence of Prostitution and Pornography – Ruhama
- Women and Mental Health- St. Pats Dublin

- Enhancing Practice with Parents and Families - Limerick

Referrals

Ascend received 15 referrals from HSE Social Work Department in 2019. Ascend have liaised with various social workers and team leaders throughout 2019 in relation to mutual cases and have found this networking to be of benefit.

January to December 2019	
Referral Sources	
Self	71
NOVAS (Homeless services)	6
Citizen Information	4
Child Protection	15
Other DV services	4
Court Clerk	4
Milford care	1
Family	3
CSMT	1
Psychotherapist	1
Employer	1
Silver Arch FRC	6
Housing	3
Nursing Home	1
Barnardos	2
NTDC Staff	2
TOTAL	125

Funding

Ascend receives core funding from the Child and Family Agency. The service also receives funding from the Victims Commission and Healthy Ireland.

Cross Agency Collaboration

SAFE Ireland

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Ascend is a member of SAFE Ireland, the national umbrella body for Domestic Abuse services. Ascend attended Safe Ireland's regular AGM's. Ascend also participated in the Equality, Diversity & Human Rights Workshops.

Ascend Advisory Group

This group was created as a response to Ascend's Strategic Plan to inform the work of Ascend through interagency collaboration. This group has met four times in 2019 and meetings were well attended. Representatives attended regularly from the MWDAF, Silver Arch Family Resource Centre, North Tipperary Housing Department, Traveller Primary Health Project, HSE Mental Health Services, Gardaí, NTDC, HSE Primary Health Care, Mid West Rape Crisis Centre, Citizens Information Centre, Barnardos and Tusla Social Work.

Committee participation

Ascend has worked in partnership with Tusla Social Work, Housing, Court Services, Gardaí, Social Protection and other local services in supporting clients and raising awareness of Ascend's work in 2019.

Ascend participated in the TLC Kidz Steering Group meetings in 2019. Ascend has worked to strengthen and develop their interagency work with other local Domestic Abuse Services – Adapt and Cuan Saor through participation, engagement and training. For example, the Ascend Coordinator sat on the interview panel for Cuan Saor interviews.

We also sit on Outcome 1 and Outcome 3 of CYSPC Sub – Groups. CYSPC is the Young People Services Committee for Tipperary.

We also attend all Homeless Action Team meetings held in the Civic Offices twice a month.

Awareness Raising

Information Sessions

Every opportunity was taken to provide various professionals with information on the nature and complexity of domestic abuse and also responding appropriately to clients concerns and situations. Ascend literature was distributed at each event.

Ascend delivered the following information sessions in 2019, they include:

Talks delivered and awareness events attended:

- Three presentations to Citizen's Information, (Nenagh, Thurles and Roscrea)
- Tipperary Infant Mental Health
- Elder Abuse Awareness Day – Hosted by HSE and the National Safeguarding Team - Scout's Hall – Nenagh

We would also give regular interviews on Tipp FM.

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16 Days of Action

Ascend Domestic Abuse participated in the 16 days' campaign by getting local organisations to 'Orange Up'.

Thirty venues across North Tipperary displayed the campaign material. "Orange Day" by the United Nations Secretary-General's Campaign UNiTE to End Violence Against Women is a day to raise awareness and take action to end violence against women and girls. As a bright and optimistic colour, orange represents a future free from violence against women and girls. Orange Day calls upon civil society, governments, and UN partners to mobilize people and highlight issues relevant to preventing and ending violence against women and girls, not only once a year on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women (25 November).

TLC Kidz

TLC Kidz is a 12-week Group work Programme for Children and their Mothers who have experienced Domestic Abuse. The emphasis throughout is to support women in the knowledge of how to best help their child in healing from the impact of abuse. It is a multi-agency programme with participation from Barnardos, Ascend Domestic Abuse service, Tusla - Child and Family agency, North Tipperary community services, School completion programme and Youth Work Ireland – Tipperary. During the 12-week group work programme, the children's and mother's group run concurrent on the same week. It is open to children between the ages of 5-16 (in appropriate age groups) depending on availability, children who live in North Tipperary and those for whom Separation has occurred and the perpetrator no longer resides at the family home. Ascend sits on the TLC Kidz steering group and makes referrals to the programme. Also, one staff member co-facilitates the children's group on a weekly basis.

www.barnardos.ie/our-services/work-with-families/tlc-kidz.

Healthy Relationships Programme

According to Awareness Raising of Domestic and Sexual Violence: A Survey of Post-Primary Schools in Ireland research¹ carried out by COSC, The National Office for the Prevention of Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence in 2012, the second level curriculum in Ireland does not cover the issue of relationships and safe dating.

Teenagers in schools have told us that nobody talks to them about relationships, either at home or at school. Girls ask their friends and many boys get their information from pornography. We have no contextually relevant research on this issue in Ireland but surveys in the US and the UK reveal that girls between the ages of 16 and 24 are most at risk of dating abuse. Education is critical in preventing abusive relationships among teenagers, particularly as abusers tend to fly under the radar and may appear harmless and polite to relatives and friends.

Ascend delivers a Healthy Relationships programme for Transition Year students, girls and boys to promote self-esteem, help them identify abusive behaviour and signpost services. The sessions are interactive and engaging for the young people, promoting discussion and reflective learning. The topics covered include: recognising the difference between a healthy and unhealthy relationship, how to be a good partner, examining the role of media and pornography in shaping their perception of relationships, how to keep safe on social media, and how to help a friend.

The programme runs for a six week programme which runs over a double session once a week. The programme is delivered by experienced Outreach Workers from Ascend who are Garda vetted and trained in Child Protection.

In 2019, this programme was delivered to 114 TY Students in Nenagh College and Borrisokane Community College.

Social Marketing Campaign

The social marketing campaign was based on a specific behaviour change. The behaviour that Ascend wanted to change was people's willingness to take action in situations of domestic abuse in their community. The primary message was that 'Domestic Abuse is not a private matter'.

The secondary message was to identify ways and means that people can recognise, respond and refer to the needs of women in their community in a safe and responsible way.

Ascend arrived at these two areas of work through extensive consultation with their own team and through a literature review. Research had shown that one in four women have or will experience domestic abuse in her life in Ireland. This increases the odds that members of the general public would know someone who is in an abusive relationship.

Ascend's message was targeted at the adult population of North Tipperary. They conducted a series of focus groups with groups of adults in the area and gauged their understanding of Domestic Abuse, and more specifically their willingness, knowledge and ability to respond if they were aware of an abusive relationship.

Focus group findings suggested that the general public may not always be able to identify non-physical Domestic Abuse. The findings also showed that people are scared to get involved if the male perpetrator is a stranger. This was positive, and meant that Ascend could reinforce a message that people are already subscribing to. The other major finding was that both men and women felt more comfortable intervening if the abuser or victim was known to them.

'I would stop them on the street, in a pub, in my neighbourhood- no problem. I would call the Gardaí if I was scared for my own safety. I would assist the woman. In the case of a neighbour I would knock on the door, and say that they are making too much noise etc., use an excuse. But I wouldn't do so if it was the first time the incident happened.'

When broached of the barriers to intervening most people felt that the Gardaí would not take them seriously or that the victim would not make a statement to the Gardaí. They also felt that they would be told that everything is fine by the victim, and that she might face recriminations if she spoke up. The last major finding was the various ways that the general public felt that they could help the victim. These were very closely aligned with our own recommendations of 'We can talk to the person, give them information. Support them. Ask them to speak to their GP. We can confront the abuser. Report it to the Gardaí if the children are abused. Set up a meeting with a DA services. If it's a neighbour, then knock on the door.' The overall feeling at all the focus groups was that:

If the abuser had a fear of intervention there would be less Domestic Abuse.

The second element of the campaign is to raise the level of acceptance of intervention in North Tipperary. Ascend had support from several public and community groups such as Tipperary GAA, Roscrea library, North Tipperary Community Services, Tipp FM radio station, NTLP Board and staff, Youthreach Roscrea. They agreed for Ascend to visit their group, deliver a short presentation about their work and campaign and photograph the group with visual materials such as banners and posters supporting this campaign. These photographs were used in the campaign. This was to help the general public to identify with this cause and emulate local leaders in their behaviour. Benefits of this campaign were twofold: increased awareness of the types of domestic abuse and provision of tools of safe intervention to the public.

The campaign was supported through our website, Facebook page, radio advertisement, radio interviews and a poster roll-out across the county to reinforce the message.

*'It was so nice to hear you on the radio! You were very good! It's great that you are being heard'.
'Well done. Thank you for speaking out.'*

Petition

Every bad article on domestic violence is a missed opportunity to help prevent further deaths. Responsible reporting can improve public understanding of domestic violence, help victims and their families seek justice and help women at risk access support. Over 200 women in Ireland have been killed by their partners in the past 10 years. The Ascend Co-ordinator spoke on Tipp FM about the launch of the Women's Aid Femicide Watch report in November 2019.

Some of these deaths attract media attention, yet due to a lack of guidance, domestic violence deaths are often reported in a way that compromises the dignity of the deceased woman and her surviving family. It's time to put an end to bad reporting, which has lasting traumatic impacts on

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surviving family members. Ascend started a petition to encourage the Press Ombudsman to introduce guidelines on the reporting of domestic abuse.

1. Accountability: Place responsibility solely on the killer, which means avoiding speculative “reasons” or “triggers”, or describing the murder as an uncharacteristic event. Homicides are usually underpinned by a longstanding sense of ownership, coercive control and possessive behaviours: they are not a random event.

2. Accuracy: Name the crime as domestic violence, instead of “tragedy” or “horror”,

3. Dignity: Avoid sensationalising language, invasive or graphic details that compromise the dignity of the dead woman or her surviving family members.

4. Equality: Avoid insensitive or trivialising language or images.

5. Images: Avoid using stock images that reinforce the myth that it’s only a physical crime.

The Ascend Coordinator met with the Press Ombudsman around this issue in 2019.

Voice of the Child

The Voice of the Child research project was born of all the times Ascend went to court with women in North Tipperary trying to establish safe and fulfilling access and custody arrangements for their children. They saw the challenges families were facing in the judicial process and wanted to find out what could be done to make it easier. Rather than them compiling lists of their own experiences in court, they felt that it was important to have an impartial voice. One that could channel the women’s authentic experiences and present them in a language that could be understood by decision makers and independently reflects the reality of being in court. To this end, Ascend commissioned LIT to undertake this research. The Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 funded the research. This research launched in 2018 is a small step in Ascend’s role of supporting families experiencing domestic abuse. They intend to commission further research to engage with the children themselves in 2020. Ascend will continue to advocate and lobby on this crucial issue.

Supervised Access

There is a need for a supervised access centre in North Tipperary. A place for families to meet during access times which is safe, can reduce conflict and improve trust and communication. This results in improved bonding and a better relationship between child and parent. It is recognised as a need on the CYSPP Plan for Young People for North Tipperary. It could also be used as a venue for those children in foster care to provide a place to meet their parents and brothers and sisters.

As a pilot initiative NTDC’s Social Inclusion & Community Activation Programme are bringing together relevant agencies who may have a remit or interest in having a dedicated service for Tipperary. There was a facilitated access session on in November 2019. This was well attended by local services and legal professionals. There are local calls for such a service in the area. There are currently efforts to source funding for the project.

User Testimonials

Ascend has gathered brief testimonials from clients for inclusion on materials.

'I want to acknowledge Ascend services for being with me in a long journey through domestic violence. I am firstly acknowledging that only for Ascend I would not be where I am today. Hope the funders read this testimony for ye to recognise just how long it can take to break free. Please go on to funding this wonderful organisation to change many woman's lives and their children. Thank u again ASCEND from me and from all my immediate and extended family.'

'Ascend is marvellous, I ring and speak to them any time if I was feeling down. Also I don't know where I would be without them about going to court'

"Only for you, I'd be lost. I didn't even know there was such a place as Ascend. Brilliant service."

A lady called to congratulate Ascend for the advert that was printed in the newspaper, she said *'that being a victim of domestic abuse, she found the ad very accurate and very encouraging to any person who might be in a similar situation and she just wanted to congratulate yourselves on a job well done.'*

Conclusion

Ascend looks forward to continuing to provide a welcoming professional service to women in North Tipperary affected by domestic abuse. It is our belief that the provision of such a vital service to the community of North Tipperary enhances the safety and well-being of those who engage in the service. It is incumbent that we continue to be able to support all women when they access our service and meet them at whichever stage of life they are at.

Ascend will continue to create more awareness of the issue and service in 2020. Through greater awareness of the issue women and families can expect their issue to be recognised, responded to and referred on, appropriately to and by the relevant services.