

Independent Evaluation of the Scottish Women's Rights Centre

Vicky Ling

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The Scottish Women's Rights Centre (SWRC) is a collaborative project offering specialist legal information, advice, representation and advocacy to women survivors of gender-based violence in Scotland. The Centre strives to fill the gaps that exist between women's experiences of gender-based violence and their ability to access justice through specialist legal and advocacy support services. Informed by its direct work with victims/survivors of violence and abuse, the SWRC seeks to influence policy, research and training to improve processes and systems, and ultimately to improve the outcomes for women who have experienced gender-based violence.

The SWRC also aims to test small scale innovations, scale these and share good practice, particularly with a view to developing an effective collaborative delivery model between private, public and third-sector providers. It also aims to develop an innovative model of service delivery in order to clarify how legal aid funding can best be used in developing areas of law. It also seeks to identify best practice and shares learning through public legal education.



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The SWRC commissioned Vicky Ling, an experienced consultant working in the legal sector¹, to carry out an evaluation in order to:

- Inform the future direction of the (Scottish Women's Rights Centre) SWRC in relation to service delivery and strategic impact, including
 - To enable funders to better identify the costs and components of specialist legal advice and help direct funds more effectively
 - To ensure strategic outcomes highlighting access to justice issues inform policy development
 - To support legal advice providers to better evidence their own effectiveness, explore their models to improve practice, and help funding go further
 - To support the Violence Against Women sector in making the case for enhancing specialist legal service provision for survivors of gender-based violence

¹ See Appendix 2 for more information

One organisation, three partners

The SWRC was launched in April 2015 as a partnership between Rape Crisis Scotland (RCS), the University of Strathclyde Law Clinic (USLC) and the Legal Services Agency (LSA). The SWRC received start-up funding from Foundation Scotland, with the Scottish Legal Aid Board and the Scottish Government Justice Fund subsequently providing on-going project funding for the core activities of the SWRC. Following a tender process, JustRight Scotland (JRS) entered into a partnership with RCS and USLC as the legal service provider for the SWRC in October 2017. More recently, funding was granted by the Rosa Fund for a solicitor specialising in sexual harassment cases.

The SWRC is not a single legal entity which employs its own staff, as most third sector agencies do. It does not have its own premises. People involved in the SWRC are based in the premises of their particular employer (RCS, JRS or USLC), or in the case of clinics, deliver services from the premises of a network member organisation. It is a partnership organisation comprised of three partners working together and informed by a wider Advisory Group (see Diagram 1).

The SWRC was initiated as a response to legal need. Statistics published by the Scottish government² show that the police recorded 59,541 incidents of domestic abuse in 2017-18, an increase of 1% compared to the previous year. 44% of incidents of domestic abuse recorded by the police in Scotland included the recording of at least one crime or offence. The most frequently recorded offence was common assault, followed by breach of the peace etc. There were 110 incidents of domestic abuse recorded by the police in Scotland per 10,000 population in 2017-18. Clackmannanshire (162) and West Dunbartonshire (153) recorded the highest incident rates per 10,000 population. The Orkney Islands (49) and East Dunbartonshire (52) recorded the lowest rates per 10,000 population. Where gender information was recorded, around four out of every five incidents of domestic abuse in 2017-18 had a female victim and a male accused.

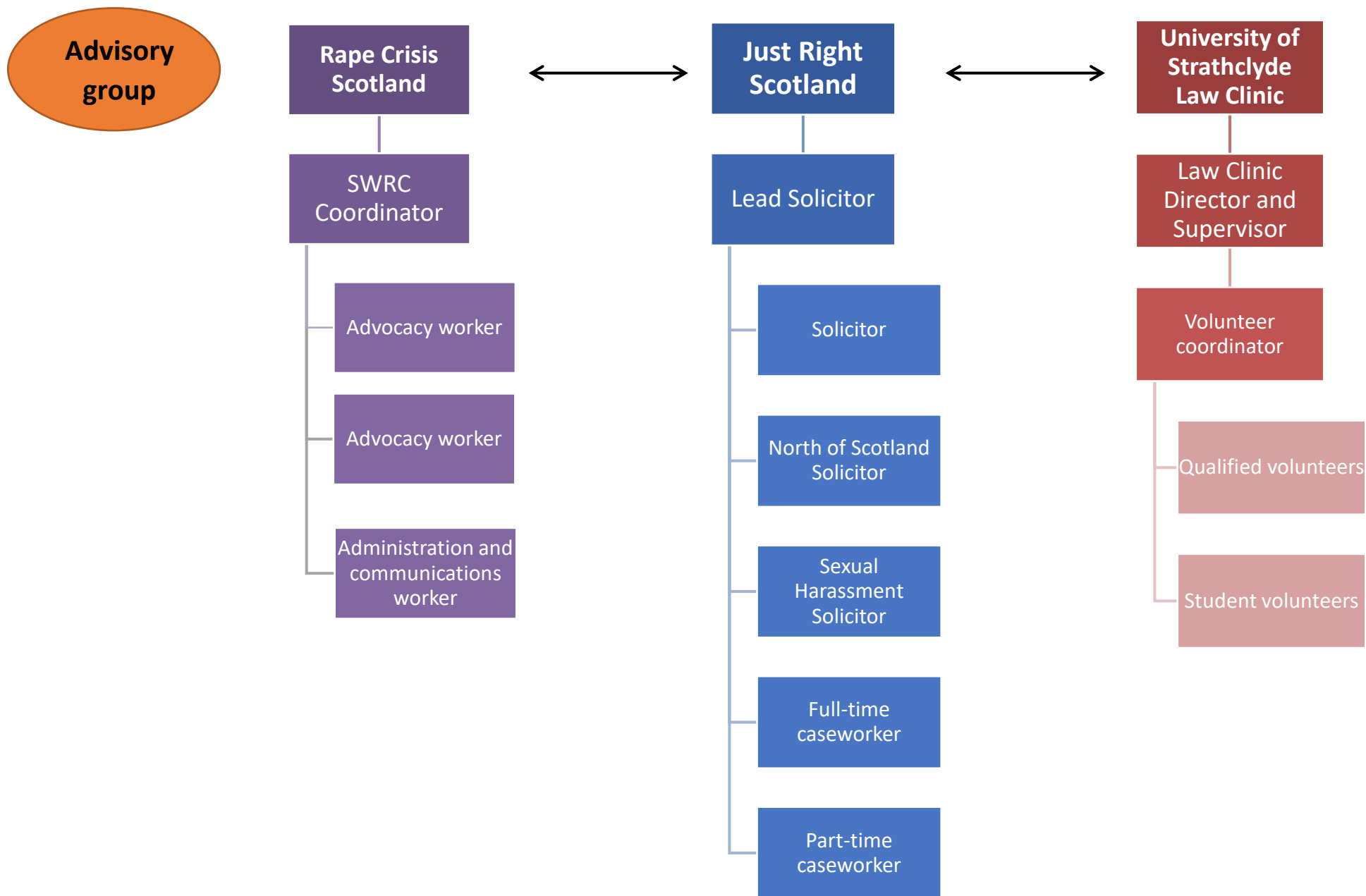
The SWRC brings together organisations supporting women who experience abuse, academics, practising lawyers and advocacy workers in a unique combination. Its work is informed by an Advisory Group of a wide group of stakeholders, who help identify unmet need and share learning. The members of the Advisory Group include: an Advocate with both civil and criminal law experience, Clan Childlaw, Engender, the Equality and Human Rights Commission, a Family law solicitor, a retired Police Scotland officer with expertise in gender-based violence issues, who is involved in reviewing Police practice through Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary Scotland, Rape Crisis Scotland, Shakti Women's Aid, Scottish Legal Aid Board, Scottish VAWG Unit, Scottish Women's Aid, University of Glasgow, and the University of Strathclyde.

How SWRC delivers services

Today, SWRC delivers its services using traditional face-to-face surgeries, telephone helplines, and online. 27% of women find out about SWRC online. Surgeries are available in Lanarkshire, Glasgow, Edinburgh, the Forth Valley, Dundee and Inverness. However, SWRC cannot meet the entirety of unmet demand for legal, social and other services which women need, so it works closely with other agencies in the violence against women sector. Most women (52%) are referred to SWRC by agencies such as Women's Aid, Rape Crisis Scotland or other advice agencies. Appendix 1 summarises how the SWRC has developed since its inception.

² <https://www.gov.scot/publications/domestic-abuse-recorded-police-scotland-2017-18/>

Diagram 1 - SWRC partners and Advisory Group



Legal services are provided by JRS and legal staff/caseworkers are employed by them. Advocacy support, communications and administration, including the SWRC co-ordinator, are provided by RCS. Trained students from USLC support the solicitors operating the helpline, for example with legal research, administration and triage. More experienced USLC students, who have received additional training, may take on a volunteer co-ordinator role, conducting some triage in relation to voicemail messages. This provides an opportunity to get involved with the organisation at a deeper level as well as developing personal skills. During the summer vacation, SWRC offers a student placement scheme; students who have undertaken a placement often retain a close involvement with SWRC and one has joined the organisation on qualification as a solicitor.

Stalking was identified by the SWRC Advisory Group as an area of gender-based violence with little or no dedicated service provision and is a relatively new area of law. Improving access to justice through the provision of digital technology was identified as a key objective within the wider remit of the SWRC. The FollowItApp (discussed further below) was developed to record incidents to enhance the investigation of stalking offences and assist in building stronger cases for court. It is available across Scotland.

At the outset of the SWRC, statistics were captured using data sheets in order to report to SLAB. Towards the end of 2017, SWRC started to use the OASIS case management database for reporting to funders. OASIS also provides additional functionality for the helplines and casework. Combining the figures from both sources shows that since its launch, SWRC has dealt with 1,599 calls. At the start in 2015, calls were running at around 18 a month, this rose to around 24 a month in 2016, 28 a month in 2017, building to around 38 calls a month in 2018 and 39 calls a month in 2019³. Most are from women calling on their own behalf; but some are from voluntary sector agencies calling on behalf of women with whom they are working.

The SWRC provides Scotland-wide helplines. The helplines offer information and initial legal advice to women who have experienced violence and abuse. Between October 2017 and February 2019, 63% of callers reported experiencing domestic abuse. Stalking, harassment, and other sexual offences were the next most frequently reported. The most frequent legal issues they raised concerned children (25%), protective orders (24%) and dissolution of relationships (14%). Callers are provided with initial information and advice and may be referred onto external solicitors (37%), Women's Aid or Rape Crisis Scotland, or another appropriate service, including SWRC's own legal team.

There are relatively few solicitors working for SWRC, so capacity for the organisation itself is limited, with around 4% of callers being taken on as clients. The organisation has adopted a set of criteria related to its strategic aims, to assess which callers' problems are most appropriate for in-house casework:

³ These figures are averages over six or twelve month time periods. During particular months calls dealt with could be higher or lower than these figures.

- Those requiring interventions in the interplay between the civil and criminal justice systems (including protective orders)
- Cases demonstrating a need for increased protection and rights for female complainants within the criminal justice system
- Stalking and harassment cases (including obtaining civil orders)
- Civil routes for compensation and liability for women
- Abuse experienced by women at university and in employment
- Cases with strategic merit in developing relevant areas of law

The SWRC is based in Glasgow, and so it is unsurprising that in the initial phase of development, face to face services tended to focus on the central belt. The Advisory Group is aware of the need to expand face to face services to cover the whole of Scotland, and additional surgeries were opened in Inverness and Dundee in November 2019. The SWRC also aims to provide a service south of the central belt to the Scottish Borders and on the west coast in future. There are also plans to augment these with a referral network of approved solicitors in private practice who have completed a good practice training course developed by the SWRC and its partners. A face to face service is important for women who have no internet access, are not confident using technology or prefer to see someone face to face.

Evaluation outcomes

It is important to remember that the SWRC is still a young organisation. It was started in 2015 with limited resources, and then had to manage a significant re-organisation in 2017, which it did successfully. The holistic approach adopted by SWRC is continuing to develop. Nevertheless, the SWRC can claim some significant achievements to date. The SWRC:

- Is acknowledged as an innovator, providing a service to women using a holistic approach combining legal and non-legal support which did not exist before
- Supports women to take their own action where appropriate
- Has achieved strategic impact, highlighting access to justice issues and informing policy development
- Has developed a value for money model where it tests service delivery methods and works with other organisations to make services available over wider geographic areas and community groups, at comparable cost to other not-for-profit legal services
- Supports legal advice providers to explore their models, improve their practice, and help funding go further
- Supports training and development of the next generation of lawyers through the University of Strathclyde and offering a seat during the traineeship of a JRS member of staff. The current trainee is working on a project to improve access to legal advice for women survivors of abuse from the Scottish islands, which will contribute to SWRC's aim of improving geographical access
- Is piloting the use of IT to gather evidence which can be used in legal proceedings through the FollowIt App.

- Provides a forum for the key stakeholders in the violence against women sector to come together across disciplines to share good practice and plan services in a complementary way
- Supports the violence against women sector in making a case for enhancing specialist legal service provision for survivors of gender-based violence
- Demonstrates success factors which enable the partners to work together which can be applied more widely
- Enables funders to understand the components of specialist legal advice and holistic support

Funding for the SWRC achieves additional impact through its partners and network as it enables them to think through and develop approaches and services in complementary ways. The feedback from survivors, considered as part of this evaluation, indicates that SWRC achieves significant benefits for the women who use its helplines and those it takes on as clients. It also facilitates access to justice for clients it refers to external solicitors who have benefitted from its training and for other women through its policy work and test cases. The three partner organisations benefit from their symbiotic relationship with the SWRC, as participation strengthens their knowledge and experience and feeds into their other activities, in turn the experience and knowledge gained from their other activities feed into the work of the SWRC. Its stakeholder organisations can also achieve more for their service users at the same time as contributing to SWRC's development.

SWRC demonstrates many of the factors identified as necessary for successful collaboration and partnership working. One or two respondents commented that the SWRC needed to gain experience or disagreed with the direction taken by the Advisory Group. However, when asked to describe SWRC, the overwhelming tenor of responses was positive. People used words such as 'trustworthy', 'principled', 'supportive', 'collaborative', 'innovative', 'fantastic', 'specialist', 'feminist', 'holistic', 'experienced' and 'hard-working'.

All the respondents who felt able to comment on the quality of services provided were positive.

The governance model the SWRC has adopted is effective. It has achieved a great deal using its current virtual organisation model and there was no appetite for creating a separately constituted organisation at this stage. Creating SWRC as, for example, a separately constituted charity, would require significant additional resources, and would be likely to detract from resources available for SWRC's strategic aims. It is unclear what the benefits of such a change would be at present.

SWRC has grown considerably since its inception, a wide range of services are being delivered through paid and voluntary staff to fill an identified need (see Appendix 1 for more information on the development of the SWRC). Having managed considerable development and change in the five years it has been in existence, it is recommended that SWRC enters a period of consolidation. This will enable it to develop the strategic priorities identified by its Advisory Group. There was no evidence that a significant change of direction is needed at this stage.