



Milton Keynes Women & Work Group

is a unique organisation, established in Milton Keynes in 1978. We offer free Advice, Guidance, Training and Support to women who are unemployed and preparing to return to the workplace, or who are in low paid/low skilled jobs.

At our Drop-In Centres, advisers give advice on local employment opportunities, further education and training opportunities. One-to-one appointments allow for a more in-depth look at career paths, preparing CVs and interview techniques.

We offer training courses in Jobsearch skills, IT skills and Personal Development. We are also currently running a *Parent and Child Project*, offering a series of free training courses designed to improve skills and communication between parents and their children.

Our clients benefit from free crèche facilities and free training accreditation.

We also offer our expertise to organisations and individuals not eligible for our free services.



In the first 10 months of this financial year we have provided services to 583 women, compared to 589 for the whole financial year 2007/08. This includes:

- Women returners (59%)
- Lone parents (35%)
- Women from ethnic minority groups (53%)
- Women with few or no relevant, up-to-date skills or qualifications (35%)
- Women in low paid/low skilled jobs (14%)

Many of our clients need limited support to enhance their Jobsearch skills in terms of applications, interviews and confidence raising. A significant number, however, are victims of childhood abuse, rape, domestic violence and subsequent mental health issues. These women need longer-term support.

MK Women & Work is currently contracted to support women into further training, volunteering or paid employment by:
MK Council,
the Learning & Skills Council
and
the Department for Work & Pensions (via Action for Employment)

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Read overleaf how we are responding to pressures of the economic downturn and changes to our funding criteria

Impact of the Economic Downturn

Between April and December 2007 Women & Work had 252 new clients accessing Information, Advice and Guidance. Over the same period in 2008 that rose to 356, an increase of 41%. Comparing the periods Jan-Dec 07 with Jan-Dec 08, Internet enquiries also rose by 28%.

Although most women self-refer, 25% of all new clients are referrals from Job Centre Plus. They are only sending those women whom they cannot easily cope with. These commonly demonstrate multiple needs in terms of literacy/numeracy and other barriers to overcome, such as poor soft skills (e.g. confidence and motivation, lack of interpersonal skills and chaotic personal lives) prior to becoming job ready. We receive no payment for these referrals.

Our Response

The Trustees of Women & Work have recently responded to the increase in demand for Information, Advice and Guidance by authorising the appointment of an additional part-time member of staff, without having project funding to pay for it. The intention is that this will be recovered through an increase in the number of successful paid outcomes.

Impact of changes in the way our work is funded

In the past, 'success' for Women & Work was measured in helping women to gain confidence, skills and qualifications and to seek paid employment at a pace that suited the individual's needs.

However, 30% of the organisation's income is now based on achieving paid employment outcomes. For example, in the case of one of our A4E projects, 71% of the funding is employment outcome related. Clients are required to get a paid employment outcome within 19 weeks of joining the project. In order for Women & Work to receive a full payment, our client has to remain in the job for 6 months.

Increased Risk to our organisation

There are several factors making such work increasingly risky:

- Unemployment is rising and there are now fewer job opportunities.
- Many women on the courses have childcare responsibilities and are looking initially for part-time employment. Milton Keynes has fewer part-time job opportunities than the national average.
- Many of the women who self-refer to Women & Work are in crisis and their journey to confidence, self-esteem and employability can be a long one - up to 2 years - and certainly longer than 19 weeks.
- Over 50% of clients are from BME communities, some of whom have language problems, which means it takes longer to successfully find a job.

Our Response

What we have had to do is to run extra courses and set up a workshop programme that hopefully will get more than the target number through training. Should it meet the outcome of paid employments these costs will be recovered.

Whilst determined to survive and offer an excellent service, the pressure to get employment outcomes at a time of severe economic downturn has led the organisation to:

- change the content of courses - less emphasis on personal development and more on job search skills;
- focus on the more able - only allowing 25% of course membership to those not yet ready for work, when in the past there was no minimum - women were allowed as much time as they needed to be ready to seek employment

This is, of course, at odds with our core purpose of helping disadvantaged people to change at their pace. Women & Work is, however, endeavouring to continue to offer services to all our client group, through having recently gained some funding related to achieving some longer-term outcomes.