CUTTING WOMEN OUT

A study of how the cuts will affect women living in Islington
The cuts to public spending that have taken place since the 2010 Emergency Budget have had a disproportionate impact on the poorest and most vulnerable people. While these cuts affect everyone, in a society where women still suffer from economic inequality and are still responsible for the majority of caring responsibilities, including childcare, maintaining family life and looking after older or disabled dependants, it is women who are disproportionately affected. Women are already experiencing the brunt of cuts to services, jobs and benefits and this will only worsen as further spending cuts start to bite.

Although the decision to cut public spending has been made at a national level, the implementation of many of the cuts is happening locally. Some local authorities have faced more severe cuts to their budgets than others and different authorities have made different choices about how to implement these cuts. In order to properly examine the impact of the cuts it is therefore important to look at their effect on the ground in different parts of the country to discover if they disproportionately affect individuals living in different areas. Only after the impact of these cuts has been properly assessed can action be taken to try and mitigate the potential damage.

This looks at the impact of austerity measures on women living in 1 inner London borough, Islington. It examines which cuts have the biggest impact on women and what the effect of these cuts will be in long-term - on them, their families and the wider community.

We are indebted to the previous studies carried out by Coventry Women’s Voices along with the Centre for Human Rights in Practice at the University of Warwick, which examined the impact of the cuts on women in Coventry.\(^1\) We drew on these as well as the TUC/Coventry Women’s Voices and the Cuts Toolkit as the starting point for our research.\(^2\)

### The current situation in the UK

A series of research reports by a number of organisations including the TUC, Women’s Budget Group, Fawcett Society and Coventry Women’s Voices with the Centre for Human Rights in Practice at the University of Warwick have shown that the cuts are hitting women disproportionately hard.\(^3\) The Fawcett Society has described this as the ‘triple jeopardy’ effect where women are being hit in 3 key ways:

\(^1\)M Stephenson and J Harrison, Unravelling Equality: a human rights and equality impact assessment of the spending cuts on women in Coventry, Coventry Women’s Voices and the Centre for Human Rights in Practice, University of Warwick 2011

\(^2\)Women and the Cuts TUC Toolkit, M. Stephenson, 2011


1. Women are being hit hardest by cuts to public sector jobs, wages and pensions
2. Women are being hit hardest as the services and benefits they use more are cut
3. Women will be left ‘filling the gaps’ as state services are withdrawn
Women are now contending with the day-by-day, cumulative erosion of their rights and wellbeing. They are losing jobs and being pushed out of the workplace by cuts to childcare support and by cuts to public services like adult social care. They are also becoming poorer as cuts to tax credits and welfare benefits bite. They are finding it harder to provide safe and suitable accommodation for their families and are the hardest hit by the cuts to health and other public services. They are also shouldering the burden that cuts to services have created, working unpaid and unacknowledged as carers. Women are facing choices between staying with violent partners or becoming homeless.

This is the reality many women are now facing and the situation is due to get worse as the cuts really start to bite. Despite warnings from service providers, charities and think tanks, successive budgets have made the situation worse.

The disproportionate impact of the cuts on women and the devastating affect these are having on the poorest and most vulnerable is clearly demonstrated by the situation of women living in Islington.

Why Islington?

Islington is one of England’s most deprived boroughs and one of the hardest hit by the budget announcements of 2011. It has one of the highest rates of child poverty in the area, the second highest rate of people receiving Disability Living Allowance of any London borough and a huge gulf between the economic power of the richest and the poorest. (Ref: Islington Fairness Commission, July 2011)

Women experience the greatest disparity of income; full-time female workers receive £111.40 less per week on average than their male counterparts. With such significant levels of inequality and poverty, Islington council is dependent on government grants to provide a range of services for some of the most vulnerable people in the area.

Furthermore, the availability of services to people living in Islington has been severely affected by the public spending cuts. In a recent report published by the Islington Fairness Commission, it was revealed that by 2014/15, there will be £335m less spent per year on public services in the borough. These reductions in the public sector are being compounded by higher living costs, a less secure labour market characterised by rising unemployment and wage stagnation, and a reduction in welfare payments made to Islington residents by the government.

As a result of the reduction in money coming from central government - cuts of £39m to direct government grant cuts in financial year 2011/12 with a further £13m in financial year 2012/13 - the council is endeavouring to make savings of £100m in the next 4 years, over a third of their net total budget. The following graph, taken from Islington Council’s online spending power analysis highlights the severity of the cuts to services in Islington compared with other boroughs. This shows that comparably Islington is experiencing the highest percentage of spending cuts of all London boroughs.

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6 Annual survey of hours and earnings - resident analysis, ONS Crown Copyright Reserved [from Nomis on 18 September 2012]
6 ibid
Through interviews with organisations working in the borough and examination of data, our research shows that while the cuts are having a severe impact across the borough, women living in Islington are bearing the brunt. As well as having a deeply detrimental impact on women overall, it is particularly the most vulnerable groups and individuals who are suffering, not least because they are experiencing the cumulative impact of cuts across different areas.

The structure and scope of this research

This report is split into 2 sections. The first lays out what cuts have taken place across key areas which affect women. We examine what the cuts are, who they affect and their short and long-term impacts. In each chapter we have included:

- an overview of the cuts and how they affect women
- how the cuts are affecting women in Islington
- a prediction of the likely longer-term impact of the cuts on women in Islington.

The second section looks at specific demographic groups to examine how they have been affected by the cuts as a whole. We seek to demonstrate how certain groups are not just struggling to cope with 1 cut, but are being profoundly affected as multiple cuts across different areas have an impact on their lives.
The approach of this report

We have based this report on secondary data analysis, guided by the TUC/Coventry Women’s Voices and the Cuts toolkit, interviews with local agencies, service providers and voluntary organisations, a poll on survey monkey carried out in January 2012 and a focus group carried out in May 2012. We attended a discussion hosted by Islington Council in May 2012 to promote the research and the report.

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Benefits and tax credits: the impact on women

The cuts

Women rely more on benefits and tax credits than men, due to both their greater caring responsibilities and their relative economic inequality and poverty. On average, 1/5 of women’s income is made up of welfare payments and tax credits compared to 1/10 for men. Therefore, cuts to welfare inevitably have a devastating and far heavier impact on the female population. To date, a total of £18.9 billion worth of cuts per year have been made to welfare with further cuts of £10 billion to come by 2016/17.

A number of these changes that will hit women particularly hard include:

Pregnancy benefits

- The Health in Pregnancy Grant, which was a payment of £190 paid to all women in the 25th week of pregnancy and designed to support maternal health, was abolished from January 2011.
- The Sure Start Maternity Grant of £500, which was paid to low-income women from the 29th week of pregnancy, is now only payable to women pregnant with their first child.

Child Benefit

Child Benefit rates have been frozen for 3 years from April 2011 – government figures estimate that this will reduce the benefits’ real value by over 10% by 2013/4 amounting to a real-terms cut. In the vast majority of cases (94%), Child Benefit is paid directly to mothers because they still take primary responsibility for caring for children.

In addition, families with a higher-rate tax payer will no longer be entitled to child benefit.

Tax credits

- A commitment to increase the child element of Child Tax Credit (CTC) £110 above inflation in 2012-13 has been reneged on. This represents a cut of almost £1 billion per year. Approximately 5.5m families will lose out as a result of this change.
- The baby and infant elements of the CTC have been abolished.
- Families earning more than £40,000 have lost all entitlement to tax credits and the rate at which tax credits are withdrawn as income rises will increase from 39% to 41%.
- The basic rate of tax credit and the rate for people working more than 30 hours a week will be frozen for 3 years.
- Families with children will have to work for at least 24 hours a week (instead of the current 16) and one of them must work at least 16 hours in order to qualify for the Working Tax Credit.
- The childcare element of the Working Tax Credit has been cut to cover only 70 rather than 80% of childcare costs. This will particularly hit single mothers who comprise the majority of recipients, reducing, and in some cases outweighing the financial benefits of work.

Lone parent benefits

From 2012 lone parents - 92% of whom are women - with children over 5 are required to move from Income Support to Job Seekers Allowance and therefore must actively seek work. If lone parents fail to find suitable work that is compatible with their childcare responsibilities they will face a cut in the amount of benefit they receive. The Child Support Agency is being replaced by...
the Child Maintenance and Enforcement Commission (CMEC). Lone parents whose partners do not voluntarily make child maintenance payments and need to use the services of the CMEC will be charged an upfront application fee as well as between 7% and 12% of any maintenance paid.

Housing benefits

In addition, changes to housing benefit, in particular the cap on Local Housing Allowance, are making it harder for families to remain in the borough, which has some of the highest rents in the UK. This in turn could make it more likely that women will be forced to move away from local family and community networks which are often relied upon to provide an affordable solution to child-care issues. Furthermore, 1 million more women claim housing benefit and 50% of recipients are single women.12

Up-rating of benefits

Benefits and tax credits which were linked to the Retail Price Index, are now linked to the lower Consumer Prices Index which will reduce the value of all benefits over time. Given benefits comprise a greater portion of women’s incomes than men this change will hit them harder.

Universal Credit

From 2013 the government is planning to replace all in and out of work benefits with a single monthly payment called Universal Credit.

The Women’s Budget Group and others have highlighted the way in which payment of the Universal Credit will disadvantage women.13 Their concerns include:

- Second earners in couples, who are usually women will face disincentives to stay in paid work. This will increase women’s financial dependence on their partners and leave them at risk of poverty if the relationship breaks down.
- The government’s plan that 1 person should claim Universal Credit on behalf of the family may leave women without any independent income. There is evidence that in some couples the person who receives the income has a greater control over how it is spent.14
- Universal Credit will be paid as a single monthly payment. This may cause problems with budgeting for some families and will have a particular impact on women who are often responsible for managing day to day spending.15
- Universal Credit will have a more severe sanctions regime. Someone who does not take part in Mandatory Work Activity (MWA) can lose benefits for 13 weeks for a first “offence” and 26 weeks for a second. This will leave some women with no income at all and have particular implications for the many single mothers required now to seek work when their youngest child reaches 5, who have difficulty finding work that is compatible with their caring responsibilities.
- Many single mothers will lose out in cash terms under the scheme: Save the Children have calculated that single parents - 92% of whom are women - with 2 children working full-time earning an annual salary of £15,000 per year with childcare costs of £232.40 per week will be £59.49 worse off each week under the system, largely because of the reduction in childcare support.16

The system will introduce a cap on the total amount of benefit that working-age people can receive so that households on out-of-work benefits will no longer receive more in benefit than the average weekly wage earned by working families. This will particularly affect lone parents many of whom will be forced out of their homes and local areas as housing benefit costs take up too much of their allowance leaving too little behind for other living costs such as food, clothes and heating.

Domestic violence charities have also expressed grave concerns about the impact of the Universal Credit where regulations will mean that survivors will receive less housing costs and so be unable to pass on the full cost to refuge services. This will result in closures and could decimate the refuge network.

The impact on women in Islington

Evidence reveals how some of these national level changes, combined with local level changes, are likely to impact on women in Islington:

As of February 2012 there were 13,760 women and 13,090 men of working age in Islington receiving benefits.17 In April 2012 there were 16,300 families in Islington receiving tax credits (both in and out of work).18

There are 7,130 (93%) female-headed single parent households compared to 575 (7%) male-headed households in Islington and 3,900 women claim lone-parent support, compared to 100 men. These figures are roughly in keeping with the rest of the UK and London - framed in terms of benefit cuts, just over half of children live in a household in receipt of Housing Benefit.19 A third of Islington’s children live in a lone-parent household.

The high levels of rent in Islington mean that households have higher monthly costs. Households which are not working 24 hours or more (or 16 hours for single parent households) will still be affected by the total welfare benefit cap and have to make up the shortfall in rent from their other income. Islington has the second highest level of child poverty in the country. 40% of households with children are claiming income support.

A significant proportion of families live on very low incomes. Over 40% of resident females and just under 30% of all resident workers were earning less than £12 per hour.20

Islington Councils Income Maximisation Team (also known as the Welfare Rights Unit) works with Islingtons most vulnerable residents and when it is successful in increasing a clients income, the average weekly increase is about £75 a week. 38% of referrals to the team come from Islingtons Adult Social Care; a large proportion of these are from people approaching social services for the first time after the onset of a serious

17 Benefit claimants, working age client group - ONS Crown Copyright Reserved [from Nomis on 18 September 2012http://www.nomisweb.co.uk,]
disability or a significant deterioration in their health. On average, benefits make up 1/5 of women’s income and only 1/10 of men’s income and so a reduction in this type of service is likely to affect women disproportionately.

In submission to the Islington Fairness Commission, strong concerns were raised that the heavy cuts experienced by the Income Maximisation team will have a severe impact on the incomes and well-being of those most in need. Such a drastic reduction in services means that the most at-risk in Islington, particularly those who are unable to access drop-in services, not having access to correct advice and support with benefit issues and ultimately losing out on income they should be receiving.

The long-term impact

In the long term, this could lead to women in Islington finding it harder to stay out of poverty. The Government’s objective to encourage all back into work is only likely to succeed if more jobs are available to women in Islington. This is discussed further in the following section.

Employment: the impact on women

The cuts

Public sector jobs

Women across the country are facing cuts to jobs in the public sector and in private and voluntary sector jobs which are publically funded. Women are disproportionately affected by public sector job cuts because they are more likely to work in the sector. Nationally 65% of public sector jobs are done by women and 40% of women in paid work, work in the public sector.

There have been very significant cuts by public sector employers, as they seek to meet overarching budgetary cuts. These include:

- 50,000 jobs in the NHS.
- 34,000 jobs in the police, including 16,000 front-line staff are likely to be cut by 2014/15.
- 88,000 jobs in local government were lost in 2010.
- 12,000 jobs are at risk in primary schools, according to head teachers.

23 http://falseeconomy.org.uk/blog/more-than-50k-nhs-job-losses
26 www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-13223035
Losing a job is devastating for anyone, woman or man. Yet it is important to recognise that women may face particular difficulties when they become unemployed. They are more likely to have been in low-paid work, have dependents living with them and they are less likely than men to have savings. Women therefore face a greater risk of immediate poverty as they become unemployed. It is within this context that we must understand the impact of rising female job losses.

Childcare

At the same time, cuts to benefits and support services which enable women to seek and retain work have also made finding and keeping a job harder. In particular, women are facing cuts to childcare provision and an increase in the costs of childcare which is making it hard for some women to stay in paid work.

Childcare Tax Credit has been cut to cover 70% of childcare costs rather than the 80% previously covered. Furthermore, some children’s centres have been closed, with the Local Government Association reporting that 63% of the centres are facing changes. After school clubs and breakfast clubs may also increase their charges.

An analysis for London Councils has suggested that the changes to Universal Credit will leave a 2-parent family living in London £2,000 worse off should they both go into work, as a result of high childcare costs in the capital.

Childcare costs

Costs of childcare in London are some of the highest in the world, and 23% higher than the national average. This is compounded by a number of issues including higher rents for childcare providers and longer working hours and commutes for parents. Work carried out jointly by the Daycare Trust and Save the Children suggests that parents living in severe poverty in London are struggling to access childcare more than other parents.

A recent survey carried out by the London Assembly revealed 63% of parents in London said the cost of childcare had affected their decision about whether or not to work and 73% stated it affected how many hours they worked.

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28 London Councils/Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion, Making work pay in London under Universal Credit, June 2011
The impact on women in Islington

We have largely focused on the employment patterns of the women living in Islington (residents), as opposed to the employment patterns of the women working in Islington. However we do discuss the experiences of voluntary sector employees in the borough.

Overall, 49,600 women and 55,700 men in Islington are employed or self employed. In 2011, 19.1% of people working in Islington worked in the public sector.

Public sector job losses in Islington are having a disproportionate impact on women because a higher percentage of women work in the public sector. For example, 61.1% of the Islington Council workforce is female.

Unemployment in Islington has risen for both men and women since the start of the recession in 2008 however the rate of increase has been higher for women.

In 2008, 4,200 men and 2,700 women were registered unemployed. By March 2012 this had more than doubled among women to 5,600. Although male unemployment remains higher at 6,200 the rate of increase is lower, at just under 50%.

While in 2005, women’s unemployment in Islington was lower than the London average overall, it increased to above-average levels in 2009 and since then has struggled to recover.

Job cuts are increasing insecurity among women. In a piece of research commissioned by Emily Thornberry, MP for Islington South and Finsbury, into how women in the borough are feeling about their economic prospects, 31% said that their jobs were less secure, 14% had lost overtime, and 7% had actually lost their jobs.

Islington has huge disparities between high and low earners. Data on earned income suggests that in Islington the gross full-time earnings of the lowest earners is £351 per week compared to gross earnings of £1,127 of the top 20% of earners: the high earners are paid nearly 4 times as much as the low earners.

Women losing their public sector jobs are likely to lose out on pay since public sector jobs are typically better paid than equivalent private sector jobs, where these newly unemployed women are likely to look for work. Hence already very significant pay gaps are likely to increase. As in the rest of the UK, there is a significant pay gap with women in full time work earning on average £111 less a week than men working full time.

The effects of government cuts to childcare provisions are predicted to be particularly hard on families in London due to the high price of childcare compared with other areas in the country.

In February 2012, the London Assembly found that childcare costs in the capital were up to a third higher than the rest of the country. While the costs of childcare are much higher than other regions of the country, parents living in London are not entitled to higher levels of Government support. Just over half of London mothers with

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34 National Statistics
36 Annual survey of hours and earnings 2011 - resident analysis, ONS Crown Copyright Reserved [from Nomis on 20 September2012 available on line at http://www.nomisweb.co.uk ]
37 Tackling childcare affordability in London, February 2012 – page 8
dependent children work compared to almost 2/3 across the UK. Further cuts to support for childcare costs may make this situation worse.

Despite facing the highest level of cuts of any London borough, Islington Council has taken the very progressive decision to ring-fence childcare services and has promised to protect them. A short survey of staff employed in 2 children’s centres in Islington carried out for this report showed that women represented between 96-100% of staff working in the centres. While the service is continued, there have been some staff reductions. This demonstrates future cuts to childcare services do not only impact upon the mothers accessing the services, but also those that work for them.

As a result Islington has kept all of its 16 Sure Start children’s centres open. However, in 2011 it was estimated that nationally 2,000 (56%) children’s centres provided a reduced service and 3,100 (86%) had decreased budget, indicating the possible future pressures facing Islington’s children’s centres.

Public sector job losses

As is true nationwide, women living in Islington are more likely than men to be working in the public sector. This group have been the hardest hit by the wave of redundancies and pay-freezes.

‘Funding cut-backs and loss of personnel mean an extra burden on existing staff (mainly women - in this centre).

96.7% of our staff are women, we are now doing more work and working longer hours to deliver the same services. Any loss of performance quality could be a threat to our continued funding as we are a small voluntary organisation commissioned by the local authority.

Secondly, we are currently seeing an increase in 2nd and 3rd pregnancies in lone parent families which we suspect is in part prompted by the fear/threat of having to return to work as their first child becomes 5 years of age.’

(Head of Centre, Islington Children’s Centre A)

‘We have had cuts to our staffing, which make it more difficult to provide services to women and children. We have managed this so far by asking everyone to try to do more, but this has an impact on our ability to reach out to new families. We have also been unable to meet requests for extended services, such as increasing the length of time of after school stay and play sessions, because of budget constraints.’

(Interim Head of Centre, Islington Children’s Centre B)
Voluntary sector job losses

One refuge organisation interviewed, described how their workforce is largely female and so cuts to the organisation and subsequent layoffs have primarily affected women. Staff at the organisation are struggling to cope with the changes that they have been forced to make to child care structures, household budgets and family structures.

Childcare support cuts

As a result of the cuts to the childcare element of Working Tax Credit, Resolution Foundation estimates that 1020 households are set to lose income in Islington and the average loss will be £528 a year.\(^1\)

Voluntary sector job cuts

One of a small team of paid staff noted that the decrease in funding meant that they had to cut staff so as to provide services to more clients, the so-called “more for less” routine, resulting in the “8 to 8” (8am to 8pm) shift and problems with child care. Staff at this particular organisation have had a pay freeze for the last 5 and a half years while the cost of living and childcare in the capital has skyrocketed.

The long-term impact

The wave of pay-freezes and redundancies, combined with the increasing challenges that low and middle income earners face to get childcare, create a real threat to women’s ability to contribute to the economy and achieve their full potential at work.

The lowest paid women are at increased risk of poverty which will have severe negative effects on their health and wellbeing.

Social care: the impact on women

The cuts

Local authorities will be cutting their social care budgets by 6.9% according to a survey in 2011 by the Association of Directors of Adult Social services. Expenditure on adult social care in 2010/11 fell by 1% in real terms according to the NHS information centre.

Over the next 4 years, the Government has set Islington the target of reducing the budget for its Supporting People program by 30%, with 11.3% of cuts set for 2011/12. Islington has committed to supporting preventative care and is one of only 22 councils across the country to fund social service provision for those with moderate as well as substantial and critical needs.

The impact on women in Islington

Islington has a very heavy social care burden for a London borough, particularly when it comes to the care needs of the disabled and the elderly. We can assume therefore that Islington has an unusually high number of women providing the care needed by these groups, both paid and unpaid, since the responsibility for care is very largely shoulde-}

tered housing and floating support to enable them to live independently. There are 5 women for every man over 65 and 3 women for every 2 men over 80 in the borough. 42% of people over 60 claim Pension Credit, the main means tested benefit for older people. In London, the average proportion of over 60s in receipt of Pension Credit is around 25% and nationally about 20%. In common with the whole of the UK, the majority of the elderly in Islington are women.

The Hoffman Foundation

This organisation provides specialist services for young people with autism and Asperger’s Syndrome. They have seen their funding cut by £84,000, which has had a severe impact on how well they are able to provide services. Forced to make redundancies, reduced staff numbers have meant that the amount of time the staff can offer to clients has decreased; they report that clients now cannot receive the one–to-one care needed and care has been compromised. They are also less able to engage clients with their community, as the lack of staff means that the integrational trips, outings and events became nearly impossible.

Care for the elderly

Approximately 25% of referrals to the Income Maximisation team were for people over retirement age, around 700 individuals. Most of these referrals were from Adult Social Care, so they are likely to be amongst the most vulnerable elderly people in the borough.

The higher number of women than men of retirement age means that cuts to older people’s housing, services to allow independent living and support with claiming benefits will therefore impact disproportionately on women.

Cuts to childcare have also had an indirect effect on women relying on social care in the borough. With women making up the majority of carers, cuts to childcare have forced some out of the workforce and organisations have expressed fears that changes to Universal Credit are going to make this worse. Not only does this mean that highly trained women are unable to work, but female clients requiring care from other women, as is common, are less likely to receive support from the right staff.

The long term impact

There are strong concerns that services provided by Hoffman Foundation and similar organisations offering early, targeted support that allows disabled people to live productive lives, will be ‘dumped’ at other service providers, such as young offender teams or mental health services, services which themselves are facing cuts. As services are withdrawn, the final costs could actually be higher and the results much poorer.

When it comes to the elderly, short-term cuts are likely to result in greater expense further down the line. Cuts to funding of adult social care will also have an effect on women who will be required to fill the gap as unpaid carers as services disappear.

This will then reduce their ability to work full-time or at all, increasing their own reliance on benefits and ultimately increasing their own reliance on the state in old age.

“It’s like, you have bronze, silver and gold quality of services. We used to be able to provide gold standard of services, and now we can only afford the bronze one. We can’t provide the service that people need”

From interview with team member at the Hoffman foundation

“Our own research shows there is some misleading information on reassessment [of support needs]. People are frightened because of the extent and the way it is being used. Total welfare benefit cap leaves these people in dire straits”

Contribution from focus group
Legal Aid: the impact on women

The cuts

The Government announced cuts of around 15% to the legal aid budget in England and Wales in June 2011. These proposals mean that many people with legal problems involving employment, welfare benefits, debt, immigration and family breakdown will only receive assistance if they can afford to pay for it. As a service which women are more likely to use than men (with 57% of all recipients women), cuts to this service are likely to disproportionately affect women.48

The legal aid cuts significantly reduce the number of cases which will be routinely eligible for legal aid, including:

- most family law cases
- clinical negligence
- employment
- immigration
- most debt and some housing issues
- some education cases
- welfare benefits

The process of accessing financial eligibility for legal aid has also been restructured in civil and family proceedings. Restrictions on eligibility for legal aid mean all those with £8,000 in disposable capital or disposable monthly income of £733 per month have to pay towards their legal assistance. Percentage income based contributions will be increased to approximately 30% across all income categories. All applicants will be subject to means testing in respect of their capital and those on passporting benefits will only be passported in respect of the income part of the means test.49

There will now be a greater push to encourage clients to receive legal advice via the phone rather than in person. A Mandatory Telephone Advice Gateway will be introduced in 4 areas of law, with exceptions where the case is an emergency, or the client is a child or in detention. These are debt, discrimination (claims brought under the Equality Act 2010) and Special Educational Needs.

The amount legal advisors are paid has been restructured and for expert legal advice fees, the Legal Services Commission’s benchmark hourly rates, fees and hourly rates in civil and family matters, and rates received by barristers in civil proceedings have been reduced by 10%.

Legal Action Group, a group campaigning to reform legal aid provisions, have expressed grave concerns that many organisations providing legal advice will be either forced to cut back drastically on their services to the public or be forced to close their doors for good.

The impact on women in Islington

Legal services providers in Islington have reported a massive volume of enquiries regarding debt. They have always experienced a high volume of clients seeking help with immigration cases but over the last year certain firms, such as Fisher Meredith, have ceased to be able to offer such services.

Research by London Councils shows that deprived boroughs like Hackney and Islington received massive cuts of over £8 million to education law, employment law, housing, law, immigration, asylum law, welfare benefits.50

They have seen their funding from statutory sources cut. Whilst Islington Council has undertaken a strategic review of legal advice and has provided a new 3 year grant, enabling them to provide core services, they have nonetheless lost more than £436,000 per annum in statutory funding over the last two years as a result of cuts to legal aid, the loss of Central Government funds to the Local Strategic Partnership, cuts to the London Councils grants programme and cuts to the Equalities and Human Rights Commission. This is more than a third of their income.

The Islington Law Centre works to improve access for BME and migrant communities, working across welfare rights, debt, housing, immigration & asylum, health, education & employment. They provide legal advice and representation across the various areas of social welfare law. Despite the increases of debt cases, there will not be legal aid for debt cases unless a claimant’s home is at risk; this will create huge strains for people.

Cuts to legal aid and other funding for legal advice will disproportionately impact the poorest and most disadvantaged people.51

The cuts will disproportionately affect BME women and men who make up 26% of those receiving civil legal aid.54

People suffering from illness or disability will be particularly badly hit by cuts to advice on debt or welfare since they make up 30% of debt advice clients and 63% of people needing legal help with welfare benefit.55

Voluntary organisations that refer clients to specialist legal service will find themselves with clients they are unable to help.

The increased reliance on telephone services to provide legal aid is extremely problematic for people on a low income, or those who have communication difficulties as a result of a disability. It also destroys the valuable aspect of human interaction that legal services involve, providing isolated and scared individuals with support.

Overall, women are more likely than men to be affected by the changes to civil legal aid: 62.2% of applications for civil legal aid were made by women.52 65% of those who will lose legal aid in family law cases are women as are 60% of those losing legal aid in housing cases.53

51 “The vast majority (97%) of community legal aid recipients in 2008-09 were in the bottom 2 income quintiles, with almost 80% in the bottom quintile and a further 17% in the second bottom quintile for Legal Help.” See Ministry of Justice, November 2010, Legal Aid Reform in England and Wales: cumulative legal aid reform proposals, p. 11. Available at www.justice.gov.uk/consultations/docs/legalaidiacumulative.pdf


54 Ministry of Justice, November 2010, Legal Aid Reform: scope changes, p. 11.

55 Ibid., p. 63.
Housing: the impact on women

The cuts

Local Housing Allowance

From April 2011, changes were made to Local Housing Allowance (LHA), the housing benefit paid to people in private rented accommodation. Caps were introduced nationwide for the amount of LHA that can be claimed for different properties. The £15 weekly excess that some people received under LHA was removed to ensure that people cannot receive more from Housing Benefit than the amount they pay in rent. From October 2011, LHA rates were set at the bottom 30th percentile of rents in each Broad Rental Market Area rather than the median.

LHA rates will also be up-rated in line with the consumer price index (CPI) rather than actual local rents; this change will come into force in 2013.

The Fawcett Society notes that “these measures will have a particularly damaging impact on women as they constitute the majority of recipients of housing benefit: single women constitute approximately 50% of recipients of housing benefit, with couples composing around 25% and single males 25%.”

We have seen a few families where their HB [Housing Benefit] has been capped. There’s a little bit of wiggle room with DHP [Discretionary Housing Payment] but that is only for 6 months. But you are at risk of homelessness when that runs out.

Contributor from Focus Group

Since January 2012, those under 35 only receive the rate for a room in shared housing.

Investment in housing

Nationally, the Government has halved the overall investment in new build affordable housing from £8.4 billion to circa £4 billion. At the same time, the Government has introduced a new product “Affordable Rent” which enables Registered Providers to charge up to 80% of market rent for new build or previously social housing.

The impact for women in Islington

Almost half of all homes in the borough (44%) are social rented housing, with a quarter private rented housing. Overcrowding is a significant issue, with estimates putting 6,000 households in the borough as living in overcrowded accommodation. 2/3 of these are social tenants.

Since 2010, the number of people being accepted by the council as homeless and priority need has risen sharply. There was a 68% increase in homelessness between July/September quarter 2010 and July/September 2011. The majority of those households were placed in temporary accommodation.

According to DWP estimates, Islington households will be in the top 5 of all UK LAs experiencing the greatest losses per week as a result of the housing benefit cuts. The average amount lost will range from £22 per week for 1-bed households to £267 for 4-bed households - this is in the context of 50% of housing benefit claimants being women. Islington is already 1 of the most socially divided areas of England, with nearly half of Islingtons children living in poverty (43%). This is driven by relatively high rents and relatively low incomes.

Islington Council estimates that 3 in 10 properties in the area should be affordable to people on Housing Benefit. However, research commissioned by Shelter indicates that the changes to LHA have resulted in the proportion of privately rented housing affordable to those on LHA in inner London dropping to 21%, with a further fall of 3% predicted by 2016. Shelter also pointed out that with outer London boroughs remaining more affordable, there are likely to be significant changes to the demographic make-up of inner London boroughs like Islington, as households are forced to move to areas that remain affordable to them.

Increased pressure on the council’s housing stock makes private renting a crucial way to alleviate this huge demand; but the capping of the LHA does not make provision for the Islington’s disproportionately high rental rates.

Overcrowding is a significant problem in Islington but for single parents relying on the LHA, the loss they suffer increases very sharply the more bedrooms they have, resulting in some very difficult and potentially damaging choices.

Interviews with specialist services dealing with mental health, domestic violence and other specific issues have also indicated that single women under 35 fleeing abuse and/or suffering from mental health issues are finding it difficult to find safe, affordable housing, meaning they are either less likely to leave dangerous situations or more likely to revert back to dangerous behaviour patterns.

The long-term impact

Islington already has some of the highest rates of child poverty in the borough as well as significant issues with overcrowding. Cuts to LHA will exacerbate both of these issues. It will also lead many families to have to leave the Borough. Single mothers in particular face some extremely painful choices; move their families away from the schools, community and families they know, remain in overcrowded or sub-standard housing or accept that a very large proportion of their weekly budget will go towards housing costs.

This will only serve to increase the number of single mothers and their children living in extreme poverty in the area, thereby impacting on their future prospects.
Crime: the impact on women

The cuts

The Police, CPS and other bodies providing services to promote safe neighbourhoods and give victims of crime recourse to justice, are all facing significant reductions to their budget.

• The Metropolitan Police are seeking to make cuts of 20% to their spending, equivalent to £1 billion, between 2010 and 2015. The Metropolitan Police have taken a budget cut of £100 million, and plan to cut the number of police officers with 1,800 by 2014.

• The Crown Prosecution Service’ budget will be slashed by 25% in the same period of time. As a result, an estimated 16,000 police officers and 1,800 Crown Prosecution Service staff will be lost by 2015.

• The Ministry of Justice is planning to close 142 courts by 2015. This includes the closure of 23 Specialist Domestic Violence Courts.

• The Police and Community Safety Initiatives are facing budget cuts that may reduce the access to justice and support available to victims and survivors of violence.

Local bodies such as Community Safety Partnerships have also been charged with finding alternatives and filling in the gaps to services. However, Community Safety Partnerships themselves are facing very heavy budgetary cuts.

Service providers dealing specifically with women are particularly concerned by cuts to housing benefits, welfare benefits and legal aid, which will all make it far harder for women who have experienced sexual and domestic violence to find safe accommodation, receive the specialist counseling they require and seek legal redress.

Furthermore, the NHS is facing a budget cut which may reduce the level of support available to victims of violence. Primary Care Trusts which currently fund work with victims and survivors of violence are being abolished and it is not clear how far the new GP consortia will continue to fund this work.

The Metropolitan Police’s project Azure, working with female genital mutilation cases in London, is also facing cuts to funding and capacity. Around 24,000 girls under the age of 15 in the UK are thought to be under threat of female genital mutilation.

The impact on women in Islington:

Islington is assessed by the Metropolitan Police service as having an ‘average’ rate of crime. However, when crime rates are assessed as crime per 1,000 people Islington has the joint second highest rate of crime.

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63 London Evening Standard 2011. 1,000 fewer police as Met budget is slashed. Available at: http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/standard/article-23911597-1000-fewer-police-on-beat-in-london-in-mets-pound-100m-budget-axe.do (accessed 24 February 2012)
65 Ibid
66 Ibid
68 http://data.london.gov.uk/documents/gla-london-borough-profiles-key-findings.pdf
Last year, the Metropolitan Police reported 113 cases of rape, 188 cases of other sexual abuse, and 1385 cases of domestic violence in Islington. Real numbers are likely to be much higher as estimates claim only around 1 in 10 cases of sexual assault are reported to the police. Based on the British Crime Survey and assuming Islington is in line with national averages then approximately 2400 women in Islington were raped or sexually abused last year. 18,000 women in Islington are likely to have experienced at least 1 incident of sexual assault since the age of 16.

Around 7,000 women in Islington are likely to have experienced domestic abuse last year, and between 5,800 and 9,600 women are likely to suffer domestic violence each year. Almost half of all survivors of domestic violence are involved in more than 1 incident. This is the highest rate of repeat victimisation of all types of crime.

The Safer Islington Partnership, coordinating community safety in the borough, had its funds for crime and community safety cut by more than half from £5.2 million to £2.7 million in 2011/2012. This resulted in at least 7 council staff being made redundant. These government cuts have hit the services funded by the Safer Islington Partnership. For example, the Safer Neighbourhood Teams now have 4 fewer sergeants. This means 8 of the 16 Safer Neighbourhood Teams in Islington now share a sergeant.

Islington Council will not make any further cuts to community safety in 2012/2013. A report for the council has also proposed a £200,000 fund to ameliorate the effect of these cuts on community safety, some of which is earmarked to preserve domestic violence services. However, the Safer Islington Partnership faces other cuts in 2012/2013, such as the halving of the amount received from the Greater London Authority’s Community Safety Fund. The organisations in the borough that deal specifically with domestic and sexual violence, in common with those working across London and nationwide, are under extreme pressure to secure their own funding and struggling to fill the gaps where funds are withdrawn. Islington and London Councils have both expressed a determination to safeguard services to protect women and girls against violence and the organisations interviewed were extremely appreciative of their efforts to do so.

However, there was consternation over the amount of resources that had to be spent campaigning for continued funding even for those bodies which did not have funding cut. There is also concern that this process of lengthy consultations and campaigning will take place again in 2013.
Organisations that deal specifically with female victims of violence, including Solace Women’s Aid and Islington’s Violence Against Women and Girls, have already had to cut staff numbers and services to cope with funding cuts. Other organisations are being forced to divert their focus on services to fight for increasingly scarce funding. All organisations report that their clients’ needs have become more acute, complex and difficult to fulfil.

As a result of cuts to other services and benefits, organisations have witnessed an increase in women forced to request help, at a time when they are finding it increasingly difficult to help women access the services and assistance they need to secure their safety.

The cuts to specialist counselling services such as those provided by Solace Women’s Aid, the Women and Girls Network and the Maya Centre, so vital in helping women deal with the long term effects of violence, impact severely on the long-term recovery of victims. Violence against women is linked to long term mental illness and with physical and sexual health problems.78 By reducing the help victims receive early on, it makes it more likely that their mental health will become a significant issue later on and need far more intensive treatment.

The long-term impact

In the long term, cuts to community safety services could decrease trust and confidence in these services. As a result fewer women would feel able to use these services and therefore less likely to receive help.

How different groups have been affected by the cuts

While everyone is feeling the effect of last year’s budgetary decisions, certain groups have been deeply affected by not 1 but multiple cuts. At a time when benefits are being reduced and much-valued services cancelled or significantly reduced, certain groups are suffering on all fronts.

Lone Parents

92% of lone parents are women. In Islington, rough estimates put the number of lone parents at 20% of families compared to 14% in the rest of London. This group relies heavily on public services in order to balance their childcare responsibilities with their own employment prospects and wellbeing. Key services which this group use include childcare, housing support, legal support and welfare support; all these areas are under great strain. For example, single mothers in the borough have poor rates of employment and more likely to experience poverty.

The most striking thing is housing. They may have been used to receiving a certain contribution. Housing really is a problem and compounded with that they cannot get jobs. If they could get jobs they would. Some will volunteer and go to job centre but can’t get the right experience.

Voluntary Sector Worker contribution from Focus Group

Changes to tax credits and the looming implementation of the Universal Credit mean that single mothers in the borough, already struggling with severe poverty, are going to see their household budgets decrease further. Those receiving the LHA will be put under particularly extreme hardship and in 2013, Islington's high rental rates mean that rent payments will take up the majority of their welfare allowance when Universal Credit comes into force.

Changes to funding and services are at the same time making it far more difficult for single mothers to get out of poverty through education and employment. In 2010, Islington Council identified lone parents out of work as a key area needing work to improve equality in the borough. At the time, 3,570 lone parents were out of work. While this is a laudable aim, the cuts have severely affected single parents’ likelihood of balancing their familial responsibilities with seeking or remaining in work. Childcare is already a huge challenge; cuts to this benefit are taking away desperately needed income from those already living hand-to-mouth.

Women who are considering fleeing unsafe home environments, due to violence or mistreatment, face joining a demographic group where resources are becoming limited that the difficulties they experience could encourage them to return to dangerous partners.

During interviews with organisations working with survivors of domestic violence, single mothers were identified as being at particular risk of not receiving the necessary support to escape their situation due to shrinking budgets.

http://www.islington.gov.uk/publicrecords/documents/Housing/Pdf/supporting_people/vulnerable_families_draft_strategy_feb07.pdf

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'One of the keystones is to arrange for housing, where the woman can move on to, and this is increasingly difficult, especially for single mothers. We also aim to help them engage in language classes, in further education and courses to help them find jobs... Because most of the women have had to move borough, (we have) to help them find proper schools for their children and for them to continue their education and to help them have some interactions because most of them are quite lonely and isolated.'

Interview with service provider

Older women

Women make up the majority of the ageing population in Islington, in common with the rest of the UK. As a result cuts to older people’s services and care are likely to disproportionately affect women

In Islington, 9% of the population is aged over 65 (17,600 people) and of those there are 5 women for every 4 men, and 3 women for every 2 men over 80. Help the Aged, Islington, has identified some of the key concerns for older people including, engagement and empowerment when dealing with statutory authorities; financial worries; housing problems; health concerns, crime, isolation and lack of social contact.

According to a recent report published by the Centre for Human Rights in Practice at the University of Warwick and Coventry Women’s Voices, older women will be among those hardest hit by cuts to spending on health, social care and transport. The report argues:

1 in 5 women over 65 are already living in poverty and many more are just above the poverty line, struggling to meet the rising costs of food and fuel, which have increased far faster than pensions. For these women, even small changes to benefits can have a serious impact for example:

- Cuts in health spending have resulted in increased cancellation of hospital appointments, longer waits for appointments, early discharge from hospital and difficulty getting to see a GP. This increases the risk of women suffering longer waits for treatment, or not getting the treatment they need;
- Cuts in social care spending have resulted in staff cuts, a reduction in training and a reduction in support for carers. This risks the mental and physical health of older women needing social care and women carers;
- Cuts to transport spending has resulted in cuts to bus services making it harder to get to hospital, go shopping or visit friends and family. This risks people not accessing vital health services or suffering mental health problems because of loneliness and isolation;
- Cuts to welfare benefits and an increase in the cost of living risks increased poverty among older women. There is a strong link between poverty and poor health.1

Poverty is endemic for a number of Islington older people, driving up the numbers of women living in poverty in the borough. Examining the prevalence of pension credit is a good way of assess-

Source:


ing the extent of poverty among older people as it is a means-tested, guaranteed credit for people over 60 and below a minimum income level, 42% of over 60s in Islington receive pension credit. By comparison, only a quarter of all London over 60s are in receipt of the benefit and just over a fifth of the over 60s nationally.

Islington faces an aging population who have need of both sheltered housing and floating support to enable them to live independently. Cuts to social care spending in the UK have resulted in staff cuts, a reduction in training and a reduction in support for carers. This jeopardises the mental and physical health of older women needing social care and women carers.

Refugees rely heavily on the support of charities or community groups to help them navigate their way through the services available, such as understanding the UK health system, supporting children through education or finding volunteer or paid work.

One of the main organisations working with refugees in London, the Refugee Council lost 27% of its funding in 2011. This led to cuts to vital services, such as those those for children arriving without guardians. More cuts have occurred since. The emergency housing budget Refugee Council had provided in the past was cut by more than half in 2011, while other organizations that had supported and shared the work of Refugee Council have collapsed. In late 2011, the UK government’s Refugee Integration and Employment Service was entirely disbanded.

Across the board, refugee women are having their quality of life and their future prospects significantly harmed by the cumulative effect of cuts to the budgets of organisations that work with them, reductions in benefits that they rely on and the limiting or cancelling of the services that enable them to have their voices heard and which work with them to ensure they are treated fairly.

Refugee women are already more likely to experience cultural barriers to them seeking work; while advocacy and community education can improve the situation, third sector organisations and larger umbrella organisations like the Refugee Council working with these groups in Islington are experiencing funding cuts which will limit or force the closure of programs which work to increase access for women.

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The Iranian and Kurdish Women’s Rights Organisation have lost several funding sources, including a grant from the Home Office’s Forced Marriage Unit’s small grants scheme. Although the organisation has managed to find new funding sources, they have had to spend considerable time and effort to find new funds.

Changes to the LHA place further pressure on the availability of alternative permanent housing for these survivors and for the refugee community as a whole, housing is a serious problem.

The capping of the LHA allowance, making social housing scarcer and potentially forcing families to accept overcrowding in order to afford private rented housing, comes at the same time as services which enable refugee families to make better decisions about housing are being reduced.

Evidence gathered with local services suggests that cuts to Children’s Centres threaten the specialist service they provide to women from diverse backgrounds. Moreland and King Square Centre for example have lost a Somali Community Link worker as a result of funding cuts.

Young women

Organisations we have spoken to have expressed particular concerns that women under 35 are being ignored as ‘not a priority’ when it comes to the impact of these cuts. They have described women with complex mental and social needs losing benefits and support services. This has an impact on their mental health but specialists mental health services are also being cut.

Organisations working with domestic violence survivors have also reported that with resources shrinking, single women under 35 are not treated as a priority and so are not getting access to the services they need.

Sarah is a 30-year-old woman diagnosed with gender dysmorphia, schizophrenia and anti-social personality disorder: Previously when homeless, Sarah attempted suicide over 30 times, self-harmed and was hospitalised on numerous occasions. Her mental health has stabilised since being rehoused in the private sector but since the announcement of proposed changes to Housing Benefit, Sarah has called Stonewall every day with worries about homelessness. She is anxious that she can’t afford her current accommodation and will become homeless. If this client was to become homeless due to rent arrears, she would approach the local authority for emergency accommodation. She is likely to be in priority need...due to the high risk of future homelessness, there is already a decline in her mental health....

Focus Group contribution

“(Due to) cuts in housing, services are becoming increasingly difficult to find ... We try to re-house a single woman without children, then less and less housing associations or housing providers are willing to provide for a single woman without children, it isn’t a priority.”

Based on a survey response
Conclusions

We have found that women are disproportionately affected by the Government’s austerity measures and that these effects are multi-layered and inter-connected. The disadvantage that women in Islington might experience in one sphere of life can trigger further disadvantage in other spheres. Our focus group and survey analysis has demonstrated that the layering effect is having a particularly disruptive affect on women. In particular the high costs of rent and essential services such as childcare can compound the difficulties that women are facing.

Our focus group and survey research has highlighted that the costs of housing and the high demand for housing in Islington are contributing to significant hardship for women in Islington. Furthermore, in some cases the LHA caps are making it more difficult for young women to find accommodation, even if they are working.

We welcome the pro-active approach that LB Islington has taken, for example its Third Sector Rescue fund and the analysis it has undertaken in its own Fairness Commission.

- We recommend that Islington Council leads a co-ordinated team of advisors to support all those affected by the LHA cap and the total welfare benefit cap.
- We recommend that Islington Council seeks to reduce the costs of childcare in order to ensure that it is affordable for women who work.
- We recommend that Islington Council continues to pursue the development of low rent homes. Reducing the rent for Islington residents could mitigate some of the hardship they may face from the Government’s austerity measures.
- We recommend ongoing monitoring of the levels of employment for women in Islington.
- We recommend that women’s organisations in Islington continue to work together to mitigate the effects of these cuts to women in Islington.