



Soul Sisters: Empowering People Annual Report 26th May 2021 - 29th March 2022

Soul Sisters: Empowering People is a CIO with registered charity number 1194597 established in Rochdale, Lancashire.

The organisation has developed a Foundation Model Constitution, whose only voting members are our charity trustees.

As stated in our Constitution, the object of the CIO, to be carried out for the public benefit in Lancashire, is: to relieve the needs of and support those at risk of, or suffering the effects of, domestic violence/domestic abuse (to include sexual, physical, emotional and economic abuse) and their children, particularly but not exclusively through the provision of one-to-one sessions, peer support, group sessions, mentoring, advocacy and signposting services.

Our Activities:

- Soul Sisters: Empowering People works primarily within the borough of Rochdale, providing support to women, men and their families.
- Our support is accessed both online and in-person through peer support groups, creative classes, skills workshops, book clubs, meditation and self-care sessions, walking groups, mentoring and one-to-one support.
- We have a small team of volunteers who run online sessions and provide support to both service users and the charity's trustees.
- Our advocacy team provide service users with the knowledge and skills needed when seeking external professional help - from solicitors or paralegals, for example, as well as relevant guidance and assistance for court attendances and legal processes.
- We signpost to external organisations who can provide specialist support not offered by our team.
- We share information about our services via word of mouth, local authorities, community partnerships, local news stories and our own website, social media, podcast and mailing list.

Our Governance:

At the time of the charity's registration, Soul Sisters had four founding trustees, and we appointed two more during the year and now operate with six. Trustees were acquired through various sources - through established connections with other charitable organisations, volunteering or skills-sharing with other trustees and volunteers, or applying directly to the charity's founder Asma Begum (Chair).



Existing trustees considered the skills, knowledge and experience offered by applicants alongside the organisation's requirements, and voted to accept new board members at monthly board meetings held either online or in person. As per our Constitution, the only people eligible to be the charity's board members are its trustees, who are appointed for an initial term of three years.

We have created a **strong, experienced, female-led team** with key skills amongst our trustees including organisational strategy and compliance, charity governance, administration, mentoring, and community organisation. We have number of male volunteers who offer their expertise and experience to male service users.

Several of our trustees have experience of working within charitable organisations, and some hold trustee roles at other charities. Their governance skills and guidance have been invaluable in leading the charity during its first year. The board of trustees is therefore cognisant of Charity Commission guidance on public benefit, working in accordance with the guidance when acting for, and on behalf of, Soul Sisters and its service users.

We have two patrons who are public advocates for supporting those who have suffered domestic abuse having personal experience. They are located in the South of England and Ireland, and assist in promoting and hosting key events for our charity.

During the year, our team of trustees worked closely with volunteers to define the charity's Vision, Mission and Strategy for 2022-23 and further ahead.

Key Legal and Administrative Information:

Charity name:	Soul Sisters: Empowering People
Registered charity number:	1194597
Charity's principal address:	Unit 37367 PO Box 4336 Manchester M61 0BW

Trustees:	Asma Begum - Chair	(appointed 01/01/2020)
	Lisa Birtles - Vice Chair	(appointed 01/01/2021)
	Emma Cottam - Treasurer	(appointed 01/08/2020)
	Marie Flaherty - Secretary	(appointed 01/01/2021)
	Jo Baldwin	(appointed 01/04/2021)
	Christine Aspin	(appointed 01/04/2021)

Patrons:	Luzia Antonio
	Jo Baldwin



Our Foundation:

Soul Sisters became a Registered Charity in May 2021, after operating as a community group since the start of 2020. The organisation was founded by Asma Begum, herself a survivor, with her own lived experience of domestic abuse. Asma had begun to publicly share her own story through "Truth to Power Cafe" events held around the country. The positive response led to her creation of a support group for other women like herself. Women needing help through making new connections, developing female friendships, rebuilding self-confidence, reaching out to others for support, dealing with legal advice, family courts, obtaining financial advice and support, and more.

In December 2020, Asma and her Soul Sisters story was featured in a local news article - www.rochdaleonline.co.uk/news-features/2/news-headlines/137946/domestic-abuse-support-group-worked-through-lockdown-to-empower-women

Asma and her work for Soul Sisters has continued to receive recognition, most recently when Asma was invited to write the foreword for the publication 'Women Leading in our New World' (Proper Books, 2022) which is supporting Soul Sisters.

Our Vision: Life Without Fear

Our Values:

- **Trust** - we ensure our Soul Sisters community feel safe and know that they are in a place of trust.
- **Respect** - we encourage the Soul Sisters community to respect and appreciate each other's qualities, feelings, wishes and rights without judgement
- **Inclusion** - we welcome and support everyone who needs us. Our diverse team is representative of the community we serve.
- **Compassion** - we care deeply about our community, we listen with care and treat everyone with kindness and dignity
- **Empowerment** - we enable our community to step into their personal power, live/work without fear and actively support each other.

Our Strategic Pillars:

We empower people affected by Domestic Abuse to Live Without Fear.

We do this by:

- **Providing Support**
- **Providing Domestic Violence Awareness & Education**
- **Creating Positive Policy & Legislative Change**
- **Fundraising**



Executive Summary

In this report, we have summarised some of our **key achievements** and highlights during our first year as a registered charity. In this time, we grew our service offering, navigated the changes in the post-pandemic world - returning to in-person events whilst maintaining the online community we had built during multiple lockdowns. Our online community had already extended further afield than our geographical area of Greater Manchester and this generated support and collaboration from people based around the UK, whom we could not have connected with in person.

We have **supported two hundred people** since we began our journey, providing them with advice, support, advocacy, mentoring and giving them the tools to thrive; boosting self-confidence, highlighting the benefits of self-care and friendship, being part of a like-minded community; and feeling understood, listened-to, believed and supported, in a safe space, without judgement.

Over the next year, we plan to continue to support our existing community through offering more sessions (support groups, mentoring, creative groups and wellbeing events) in more locations, by collaborating with more local organisations. We will widen our geographical area of support to reach more people and build new connections with community partners in those areas. We aim to recruit volunteers and give them training and skills, to enable them to provide effective support for our service users. We will also continue to develop our strategy for the next year, 5 years and beyond, expanding work already done on our key strategic pillars and ways to achieve our goals. We are aiming to appoint men into our organisational roles and expand our services to male service users.

Soul Sisters: Empowering People Achievements in 2021-22

We began our first year as a registered charity by building on the work we had already done during 2020/21 as a support group, learning from our work to date and quickly adapting to face any challenges or obstacles.

Prior to our charity registration, we took part in a programme titled **Steps to Recovery**, designed to support Community Champions and help them grow and improve. As part of this programme, [Civil Society Consulting](#) produced a [report](#) for Soul Sisters. Their team met with attendees of our support group sessions to find out more and to hear their stories.

As part of the process, they surveyed 26 service users. This survey aimed to collect the views and experiences of people who had recently benefitted from Soul Sisters' services, as well as to inform about how we could adapt our services to improve and extend provision, and to consider how best to reach more people in the community, more effectively.



Excerpt from the Civil Society report:

"In seeking feedback for our services, we asked respondents how Soul Sisters have made a difference to their lives and in what ways our services have helped them. Through analysing these responses, we identified three themes:

- *Improved personal life and wellbeing;*
- *Being a part of a supportive community; and*
- *Comprehensive and effective support from the organisation.*

Improved personal life and wellbeing

Through engaging with Soul Sisters' services:

- 92% of respondents feel happier
- 92% feel less stressed and/or depressed
- 81% experienced an increase in confidence and self-esteem
- 46% improved relationships with their family.

Supportive community

As a part of the Soul Sisters community:

- 73% of respondents made new friendships
- 54% feel less socially isolated and better integrated into the local community.

The welcoming, accommodating, and safe environment that is provided by Soul Sisters is widely commented on by survey respondents. Respondents find others in the group to be good listeners and empathetic, which helps them feel comfortable to speak about their experiences.

Being around other people who have experienced similar situations, as well as meeting people who have overcome the same problems is a powerful source of peer support.

One respondent mentioned that it is also important that people of different ethnicities and cultures are able to find meaningful support at Soul Sisters, which is not necessarily the case elsewhere.

Comprehensive and effective support

- 73% of respondents feel that they are more ready to tackle abusive relationships (the remaining 27% responded with "not applicable")
- 85% feel that they are more aware of the social, personal and abuse issues they have and how to deal with them in the future

Respondents' comments also highlighted the effectiveness of Soul Sisters' approach.

They felt that they could come to the charity with a variety of issues and problems, be heard, and receive the help they need. It is encouraging that they have increased the capacity for service-users to tackle abusive relationships and other issues in their lives, which is exactly what Soul Sisters are here to do.



The charity's volunteers received a special mention: *"...the volunteers that Asma recruits are amazing and friendly - they embody the values that Soul Sisters stands for."* Beyond that, service users feel that advice provided is targeted and helpful, and some commented on advocacy and referral services (such as accessing legal advice) as being of great help.

As Soul Sisters is a relatively young organisation, respondents also noticed that it was open to suggestions, and to listening to their needs. Through adaptability, the team are able to make service-users feel reassured and comfortable, as well as encouraging a sense of agency to help them through the challenges that they all face."

During the year, we have supported several people going through family courts; providing advice, helping them to collate evidence, reviewing and explaining court documentation and connecting service users with other organisations to obtain specialist support. We have helped service users understand their rights in court, shown them how to obtain legal aid, advocated for them with external organisations, and empowered them to request additional support (including interpreters for people whose first language is not English), giving them the knowledge and confidence to speak up in court.

We have made efforts to improve our online marketing and communications strategy, including monitoring and analysis of user engagement to determine the most effective methods of communication.

In July 2021 we launched the **Soul Sisters newsletter**, to share achievements and charity news/updates, introduce members of the Trustees and Volunteers teams, as well as inform our readers on the different forms of abuse that exist, in addition to a smaller, semi-regular feature offering self-care tips.

We grew our following and improved engagement on our **social media** channels: Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. We also curated and developed our community through networking and resharing others' content, to support local CIOs and CICs through increased visibility.

Our **Twitter** account was created in July 2021, and by March 2022 it had approximately 130 followers. We increased engagement on our posts by creating featured content for awareness days such as *International Women's Day*, *World Values Day* and *White Ribbon Day*, in addition to UN's *16 Days of Activism* and *Volunteers Week*. We expanded our network during this short period, making contact with other organisations offering parallel or specialist services.

Through feedback from service users, we have learnt that some of the people we are aiming to reach via social media are unable to engage with our posts directly without arousing suspicion or alerting their abusers and/or family members to their situation or intentions.

Soul Sisters



Empowering People

We have become keenly aware of the benefit of operating private online spaces and encrypted messaging services in order to protect our service users, and have created **safe online spaces** within the Facebook and WhatsApp platforms, each with volunteers in admin roles to moderate content and members as necessary, to maintain trust and ensure users' safety. We have provided volunteers with Safeguarding training to ensure they are able to identify, act upon and report any safeguarding concerns.

In these Facebook and WhatsApp groups, members can ask for advice or support from Soul Sisters volunteers, or reach out for support, empathy and friendship from their peers. Our team will also share useful information including upcoming events/support group sessions, local community events or signpost to external organisations providing support. These groups are invitation-only, with members having been met privately by our team, either face-to-face or online, to hear their stories and find out about what type of support they are looking for.

In December 2021 we launched the **Soul Sisters Speak Out [podcast](#)**.

"The Soul Sisters Speak Out podcast aims to empower people affected by domestic abuse to live without fear. This podcast has a mission to share stories of those who have been affected by domestic abuse, sharing their own experiences and how they move forward in their lives. We will also have professionals and coaches come on board to share some top tips on how to stay strong, stay in control and recognise your own self worth."

The first season of the podcast contained 9 episodes, and featured stories from a varied group of contributors talking with Asma Begum about their own experiences of abuse, and how they had moved forward with their lives. It also included an episode with Khalid and Luboya who told listeners of the online support group **Soul Brothers** for male survivors, founded and run by Soul Sisters volunteers, and an episode hearing the story of Karen Warner, a certified life coach who launched her own coaching and support service for men, explaining how men often find it difficult to open up to others about their feelings and experiences of emotional or physical trauma.

Soul Sisters: Empowering People began reaching out to and **partnering** with more organisations in Rochdale and Middleton to hold regular, free-to-attend events for the local community, including weekly [Ladies' Creative Sessions](#) held at Touchstones, Rochdale, and 'Tea and Chat' support groups at both The Lighthouse Project and Demesne Community Centre in Middleton. These groups' aims are focused on people making connections, new friendships, building or more often *rebuilding* confidence, and taking time for self-care. Having more events in these free-to-access spaces has enabled us to support more people, providing more options, offering flexibility and removing barriers to attend, such as financial constraints or transportation requirements.

As we have been able to offer more sessions in more locations, the total **number of people we have been able to engage with has also increased**. Our attendance levels across all



sessions (online and in person) were approximately forty in the summer of 2021. By the following spring, our events had been attended by around **one hundred people**.

At the end of 2021, we were made aware of an opportunity to open a Soul Sisters base within our Rochdale community, in the heart of the town centre on Yorkshire Street. The opening of a community space within an empty shop unit, christened the [Better Together building](#), offers us a **private office**, and, additionally, the use of a meeting room in which to hold future group sessions, training and team meetings. The office will be a safe space, in which service users may feel more able to discuss sensitive issues without fear of drawing attention or being overheard by others. We have planned to move into the building during spring/summer 2022 with a small celebration of the office opening.

In February 2022 we successfully applied to the **Good Things Foundation** for the **Community Digital Skills Pathway Grant**, which will equip us with funding, digital tablets, data SIMs and access to the training platform Learn My Way to provide **Digital Skills and Employability Workshops** free of charge to residents of Middleton and Rochdale.

We have partnered with Demesne Community Centre to provide a free, welcoming space for residents who are struggling to find training and employment due to a lack of skills, language difficulties or financial barriers which prevent them from obtaining digital devices and reliable internet access. Following these weekly sessions, attendees will be able to access online training, create and learn how to update their CV, register for and monitor job-search platforms, apply for jobs and learn interview techniques. Attendees will also be able to keep their tablet and data SIM which will enable them to continue to access online services and apply for jobs after the course has been completed. We anticipate approximately 30 users to attend sessions during the summer of 2022.

Financial Review

Financial Position

For the year ended 29th March 2022, our total income was £8,025 and our total expenditure was £3,344, leaving a surplus of £4,681, made up of £1,160 of unrestricted funds and £3,521 of restricted funds.

Reserves Policy

As a charity entirely staffed by volunteers and without leases and creditors, our current level of reserves comprises our unrestricted funds of £1,160 at the year end. Maintaining a small buffer of reserves enables us to continue to cover costs and volunteers' expenses whilst making efforts to research other funding sources and opportunities.



Declaration

This report has been approved by the board of trustees and signed on their behalf.

A Begum

Asma Begum (Chair)

Date: 20/01/2023



CHARITY COMMISSION
FOR ENGLAND AND WALES

Charity Name Soul Sisters: Empowering People	No (if any) 1194597
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Receipts and payments accounts

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For the period from	Period start date 26/05/2021	To	Period end date 29/03/2022
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Section A Receipts and payments

	Unrestricted funds to the nearest £	Restricted funds to the nearest £	Endowment funds to the nearest £	Total funds to the nearest £	Last year to the nearest £
A1 Receipts					
Income from Donations and Grants	3,549	4,455	-	8,004	-
Other Income	21	-	-	21	-
	-	-	-	-	-
	-	-	-	-	-
	-	-	-	-	-
	-	-	-	-	-
	-	-	-	-	-
	-	-	-	-	-
Sub total (Gross income for AR)	3,570	4,455	-	8,025	-
A2 Asset and investment sales, (see table).					
N/A	-	-	-	-	-
	-	-	-	-	-
Sub total	-	-	-	-	-
Total receipts	3,570	4,455	-	8,025	-
A3 Payments					
Rent/hire of rooms	280	30	-	310	-
Light and heating	15	-	-	15	-
Insurance	348	-	-	348	-

Telephone, internet	274	-	-	274	-
Printing, postage, stationery and computer	665	228	-	893	-
Grants and donations paid (emergency fund)	20	-	-	20	-
Trustee and Volunteer expenses	353	516	-	869	-
Materials for charitable activities	415	160	-	575	-
	-	-	-	-	-
Sub total	2,370	934	-	3,304	-

A4 Asset and investment purchases, (see table)					
Purchase of fixed assets (mobile phones)	40	-	-	40	
	-	-	-	-	
Sub total	40	-	-	40	

Total payments	2,410	934	-	3,344	-
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Net of receipts/(payments)	1,160	3,521	-	4,681	-
A5 Transfers between funds	-	-	-	-	-
A6 Cash funds last year end	-	-	-	-	-
Cash funds this year end	1,160	3,521	-	4,681	-

Section B Statement of assets and liabilities at the end of the period

Categories	Details	Unrestricted funds to nearest £	Restricted funds to nearest £	Endowment funds to nearest £
B1 Cash funds	Bank Balance at 29/03/22	1,160	3,521	-
		-	-	-
		-	-	-
	Total cash funds	1,160	3,521	-
	(agree balances with receipts and payments account (s))	OK	OK	OK

		Unrestricted funds	Restricted funds	Endowment funds
		to nearest £	to nearest £	to nearest £
B2 Other monetary assets	Details			
	None	-	-	-
		-	-	-
		-	-	-
		-	-	-
		-	-	-
		-	-	-

		Fund to which asset belongs	Cost (optional)	Current value (optional)
B3 Investment assets	Details			
	None		-	-
			-	-
			-	-
			-	-
			-	-

		Fund to which asset belongs	Cost (optional)	Current value (optional)
B4 Assets retained for the charity's own use	Details			
	2x Mobile Phones	Unrestricted	40	-
			-	-
			-	-
			-	-
			-	-
			-	-
			-	-

B5 Liabilities

		-	-
		-	-
Details	Fund to which liability relates	Amount due (optional)	When due (optional)
None		-	
		-	
		-	
		-	
		-	

Signed by one or two trustees on behalf of all the trustees

Signature	Print Name	Date of approval
E Cottam	Emma Cottam	20/01/2023
A Begum	Asma Begum	20/01/2023