**Soroptimist International St Albans & District Speaker Meeting on the Hidden Effects of Domestic Violence held on Monday, 25 September 2017**

Notes on the session with the ladies who run the St Albans and Hertsmere and Welwyn Hatfield Refuges (Liz, Sara and Dee)

The first Women’s Refuge was opened in 1971. Until then abused wives were told to ‘Scream Quietly or the Neighbours will hear’ (title of the book by Erin Pizzey about the setting up of the first refuge). There are now 240 Women’s Refuges but that is versus 1,400 animal shelters. In Hertfordshire there are 6 Refuges.

Abused women gained legal rights in 1976 and at that time there was one Refuge place for every 10,000 of population. It is believed that only one third of abusive incidences are recorded and 500 people a year attempt suicide to escape abuse.

The report from the programme ‘Safer Lives’ concluded that Refuges are expensive and community-based services are preferable. Herts County Council put the running of Refuges out to tender and the company “Safer Places” won the process but are willing to sub-contract the running of our Refuges to the teams currently running them. However, the original 80 places on offer have been reduced to 60 which means that many vulnerable women are turned away every day. Coersive Control by one partner over another has now been recognised as a crime, resulting in more people seeking refuge.

As a result of the tender process, the St Albans and Hertsmere Refuge is being evicted from its premises which are owned by High Town Praetorian as they had hoped to win the tender process. The staff are looking for new premises and are hoping to offer 20 emergency bed spaces and two bedsits for men – it is not only women who are abused in relationships. They have also been able to recruit a new Traveller Worker who will work within the Traveller community but the approach has to be totally different. First, their trust has to be earned and then offer something such as flower arranging classes at which the women can talk freely and if necessary ask for help. This is a very carefully planned approach within a, largely, closed culture and will be watched with interest.

The Welwyn Hatfield Refuge has accommodation provided by the Borough Council and this has not been affected by the Tender Process. Safer Places will also leave the running of this Refuge to the current team.

There has been a serious loss of children’s funding from Herts County Council who believe that children’s services are already provided in the community!

The Refuges work with the (mainly) women who come to them for help by using the ‘Triple R’ method of Recognition/Recovery/Resilience to help them recognise and work through their situation.

The Tender Process will be repeated in two years’ time and will require the following targets for contacts per year:500 x Medium Risk

500 x High Risk

Plus a High Dependency Unit to be operated

The money raised by our Soroptimist group has helped fund a seaside trip, a visit by ARK Farm and 4 hours of African Drumming which particularly helps clients with mental health issues. Luton Airport has also generously assisted with funding for school trips etc.