

Women Centred Working

Taking Forward Women Centred Solutions



What is Women Centred Working?

Women Centred Working is an initiative to encourage the design and delivery of more effective services for women who are facing multiple disadvantages.

Women centred ways of working can get to the root causes of complex problems by integrating and tailoring services around women's specific needs. There is powerful evidence of the effectiveness of this approach from existing projects in local communities.

Women Centred Working has been set up to share good practice, change thinking and promote effective, women centred approaches on a wider national basis.

www.womencentredworking.com



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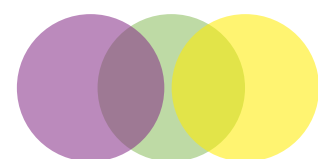
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Women Centred Working

Introduction

“The need for change is greater than ever, as is the need to make best use of resources at a time of intense budget pressure....The women centred approach can mean better use of resources through avoiding duplication, achieving multiple outcomes and preventing problems spiralling out of control.”



Welcome to the latest publication from Women Centred Working. Our initiative was set up to show how the approach that has come to be called ‘women centred’ can help unlock solutions to complex problems faced by women with multiple disadvantages. Building on existing best practice around the UK, we aim to encourage design and delivery of better services for women and families on a wider scale.

This booklet is the third in our series. The first, *Defining An Approach*, described what it means to provide services in a women centred way. They are:

- safe, supportive and community-based
- holistic and multi-agency
- tailored around the needs of individuals
- co-produced along with service users
- effective, outcome-focused and preventative
- able to demonstrate evidence of cost-effectiveness

Our second publication, *Showcasing Women Centred Solutions*, gave examples of the principles of women centred working in action and evidence of the benefits this can bring.

Now *Taking Forward Women Centred Solutions* focuses on ways in which women centred approaches can be adopted to benefit local authorities, partner agencies and residents.

Tens thousands of women each year find courage to move beyond troubled situations as a result of support from a network of women’s centres and projects. The best of these are working across agencies, sharing ideas and budgets – always putting vulnerable women and girls at heart of what they do. The Women Centred Working initiative is now exploring ways in which this learning can be applied more widely in communities and at strategic level in public service design.

The initiative is based at WomenCentre Calderdale and Kirklees and grew out of insights from decades of working alongside women at grass roots. It has

been funded by Lankelly Chase Foundation as part of its aim to ‘bring about change that will transform the quality of life of people who face severe and multiple disadvantage’. The need for change is greater than ever, as is the need to make best use of resources at a time of intense budget pressure. We believe women centred thinking can help.

This booklet begins by placing gendered working within the context of current local government priorities. It demonstrates how applying women centred principles can help meet demands on public services and gives a snapshot of latest gendered solutions in practice. We hear all too often what has gone wrong. Case studies from Cumbria, Greater Manchester and West Yorkshire ask the crucial question of ‘what went right?’ By unpicking factors that enabled these projects to respond effectively to problems faced by individuals, organisations and communities, we hope to inspire innovation elsewhere.

The women centred approach does not necessarily require extra resources. It can often mean better use of existing resources through avoiding duplication, achieving multiple outcomes and preventing problems spiralling out of control, as the business case we’ve presented here shows.

We are realistic, however, about challenges local authorities are up against. That is why we have attempted to address barriers to women centred working and offer some practical suggestions to help local authorities take forward women centred solutions.

Women centred thinking means building women’s capacities to find their own solutions, which can reduce demands upon statutory services, enrich communities – and ultimately save lives. I hope this booklet stimulates some meaningful discussions on the role of gendered working in future public service innovation.

Clare Jones CBE

National lead, Women Centred Working

Can women centred working mean smarter ways of working?



Making the case for women centred solutions

Mapping principles of the women centred approach against council priorities shows how gendered working can be of benefit in the quest for service innovation...

Service transformation

Diminishing budgets and increased demands on services have prompted a fundamental rethink of what councils do and how they do it. Placed-based approaches to transformation are encouraging service integration and deals to devolve additional powers to local government entail commitment to transformation in many areas. Central to this is the realisation that redesigning services won't work without the input of those people who use services.

How women centred approaches can help

Co-production, personalisation and prevention all require genuine involvement of people who use services, which are among the fundamental principles of gendered working. Women centred working has evidence of achieving multiple outcomes through placing women at the heart of multi-agency collaboration. Gendered services can link with strategic objectives by bringing people who design services closer to the realities of the lives of women and girls who are at risk.

Helping communities to help themselves

As the state is able to do less, there is growing emphasis on tapping into the potential of individuals and local communities to help themselves and each other. This means empowering people to find their own solutions and develop resilient communities.

How women centred approaches can help

Women are supporting each other and making things happen through women's centres, support groups and women's programmes at a local level. Local authorities can draw upon this history of self-help and volunteering that's been going on in women's centres for decades. Women centred thinking means making better use of women as assets in developing social capital, communicating with local people and planning services to better meet their needs.

Supporting families with complex needs

The disproportionate costs associated with the severe and complex needs of vulnerable women and families are a major concern. The number of Looked After Children is at its highest in 30 years, official figures show. At an annual cost of over £50,000 per child, the value of finding a better solution - for the woman, her family, the community and the local authority - is high.

Dysfunctional systems can leave vulnerable individuals and families circling around services without finding a way forward, despite using large sums of public money. The Troubled Families programme recognises the value of integrating support in reducing demand for crisis intervention. But it touches only a small proportion of families and does not recognise the gendered elements of family dynamics. Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference arrangements and Multi Agency Safeguarding Hubs are bringing domestic abuse specialists, police, child protection professionals together with positive results. Similar projects around prevention and support have been developed to good effect in some areas.

How women centred approaches can help

Tackling inter-generational cycles of deprivation, disadvantage and abuse means building women's capabilities and resilience to have healthy relationships and protect themselves and their children. While both men and women can face multiple issues, women are much more likely to have experienced childhood and domestic abuse and trauma. They are also more likely to be the main carers for children and to access acute crisis intervention. Applying women centred principles shines a new light on inter-generational disadvantage and engages with these vulnerable women and families in a way that brings long-lasting positive change.

Tackling domestic violence, sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation

The increase in reported cases of domestic violence has heightened awareness of the need to tackle the problem and the recent Coercive Controlling Behaviour legislation recognises sustained patterns of abuse. Statistically, women are more likely to be affected by domestic violence and related homicides, trafficking, sex working, sexual abuse and childhood sexual exploitation, as well as suffering female genital mutilation. The majority of women involved in the criminal justice system have been found to have suffered childhood trauma and abuse.

How women centred approaches can help

Women centred working is based on experience of specialist gendered and 'trauma informed' support. This means multi-skilled professionals build a bond of trust that enables women to get to the root of complex problems, unlock women's own solutions and build confidence and resilience. Having spaces where vulnerable women feel safe and can be supported by those who have experienced similar situations is not just an equality issue, but also a practical necessity in many cases.

Benefitting from 'trauma informed' working

Women facing multiple disadvantage may be dealing with an overwhelming combination of issues – including domestic violence, offending behaviour, physical and mental illness, substance misuse, poverty and homelessness. An estimated 10% of women have experienced abuse as a child or adult. This is known to have a serious impact across many areas of their lives, according to AGENDA's report *Hidden Harm: violence, abuse and disadvantage in the lives of women*. These women appear in drug and alcohol services, mental health services, at court, at homelessness services and in child protection meetings. While most public and voluntary services are provided in a generic way at present, there is evidence that gender specific approaches can deliver more sustainable outcomes through working holistically. In many cases this means using 'trauma informed' methods.

How women centred approaches can help

Gendered, trauma informed approaches can play an important role in meeting health inequality, community safety and safeguarding priorities through an understanding of the links between the effects of trauma and abuse and critical factors such as mental health, domestic abuse and ability to parent and protect children. Sharing troubling and complex experiences requires time, trust-building and a specialist skill-set. In 2015, staff in women's prisons in England received training in trauma informed approaches. It may be time now for other local services to review their own practice through a gendered and trauma informed lens. This would help improve effectiveness of all services and professional practice.

Contributing to public service solutions

Women centred working complements public service thinking on:

- Avoiding service duplication
- Maximising efficiency
- Multi-agency working
- Devolved and pooled budgets
- Collaboration between agencies
- Achieving multiple positive outcomes
- Co-production with residents
- Personalisation of budgets and services
- Prevention rather than crisis intervention
- Citizen empowerment and community resilience

Moving beyond barriers to women centred support



The local authority perspective

Women centred approaches, in practice present very real opportunities for helping public sector partners respond to the needs of local communities. But, at a time of reduced budgets and increasing demand on services, we all know there are no easy answers for people who are leading troubled, chaotic lives or organisations seeking to support them. This is why Women Centred Working commissioned a pilot study to gauge local authorities' perspectives on the challenges and benefits in encouraging gendered initiatives on a wider scale.

Dr Nafhesa Ali and Dr Sharon Wray from the University of Huddersfield's Families and Intergenerational Research Group (FaIR) conducted interviews with a number of local authority chief executives and directors to examine their perceptions of opportunities and barriers involved in implementing women centred working. The research provides valuable insight into how women centred principles can assist local government practices in delivering their priorities.

Benefits

The study found local authority senior managers did see a positive value in designing and delivering better

services for women and girls with multiple needs through tailor-made support, that include:

- Looking at outcomes in a more rounded way
- Providing a richer service and varied pattern of delivery around prevention methods
- Providing space to re-evaluate public and private sector practices to stimulate effectiveness and creativity
- Long-term implications in terms of effective use of resources
- Advocating self-help, empowerment and confidence-building

Opportunities

By asking about current provision, the study further suggests that many of the tenets of women centred working apply to existing work-streams, even though they are not labelled or gendered as such. Prevention, personalisation, collaborative partnerships and sharing information across agencies are well established aspects of local government's service transformation agenda which can be readily aligned with women centred principles. In terms of specific programmes, there is potential here to make use of women centred principles

in areas including Domestic Violence, Early Years and Troubled Families work in particular. Safeguarding, improving health and well-being and women's active roles in community regeneration were also noted as key areas.

Furthermore, empowering communities to help themselves is becoming increasingly important to local authorities. Interviewees recognised that opportunities could arise from bringing women together to support each other and there was openness to more work with voluntary sector partners to target women and girls. Some authorities are currently engaged in campaigns around encouraging women into work placements, entrepreneurship and business and empowering them to build confidence and skills. However, this seems to be area specific and working practices need to be shared across local authorities.

Responding to potential challenges

There are challenges in taking a women centred approach forward and the pilot study raised three specific questions around women centred initiatives:

- Why is a gender specific approach needed?
- How does this approach fit into existing services and organisational frameworks?
- How can resources be found amidst competing priorities in a climate of funding cuts?

In relation to the first question, researchers found one of the main challenges is that when the word 'women' is used there seems to be expectation of debates around rights, in which the gender specificity itself is seen as a barrier. Challenges then lie in responding to the question, "Why is it just for women? And why are we making the distinction?" Although this barrier exists in articulating the need for specific women's services, the gendered nature of the approach was also regarded by chief executives and directors interviewed as a possible strength in terms of their 'customer-focused' emphasis on meeting needs in the most appropriate way.

As the majority of users of many local authority services are women, who tend to be the main carers in

families, and a large proportion of acute intervention tends to involve them, being explicit about who users are can help maximise value. It is also helpful to remember that men can also benefit from gendered approaches; boys are affected by gendered issues and often lack role models to help them to enjoy healthy and respectful relationships and projects exist to respond their needs in a gendered way.

The questions about organisational fit and resources are related. Public sector partners have made progress in breaking down silos and pooling expenditure for shared results, but it can remain difficult to position and resource integrated solutions where there are severe budget cuts. To this end, senior managers interviewed said the best way forward lay in making the business case for women centred ways of working very clear.

Dr Ali thus concludes that: 'The aim here is not to separate gender, but recognise that gender specific needs, approaches and working practices can be used alongside mainstream service delivery. There is a need for a gendered approach to be accepted and utilised as an additional element of service support, an 'add-on' that highlights specific needs which integrate women centred practices in local authority priority areas; addressing needs and working in collaboration with third sector and other public agency partners.'



Dr Nafhesa Ali

Comments from senior managers in councils

'We recognize that if we try and invest in prevention we end up reducing acute level services.'

'We need to talk to people, human to human and have a different conversation with them. What does a good day look like for you and how can we help on a one-to-one basis and get you there.'

'If you work with women and you centre your practice in women, then you will change life chances of families and generations.'

'It wouldn't take much to identify what working from a woman centred perspective might mean in key areas and change how we deliver services and how our partners work with us.'

Case study

Inspire Women, Oldham



Inspiring community-wide change

The emerging relationship between Oldham Council, The Collective Partnership and Inspire Women Oldham, (Inspiring Futures Partnership CIC) shows the potential of women centred approaches to contribute towards more empowered and resilient communities of the future.

Oldham Council's ambition is, 'to deliver a co-operative future where everyone does their bit to create a confident and ambitious borough'. This has meant a fundamental rethink of the way things are done and a commitment to co-producing services alongside citizens. Having reviewed existing support, it found that families with complex problems often remained stuck in difficult situations despite numerous costly interventions by various agencies. The council is now investing £3.5m in its Early Help scheme, which provides tailored support to equip people to find their own strengths and solutions. This aims to prevent problems becoming more difficult and expensive to deal with. As well as offering intensive support where necessary, people with less severe needs can access 'lighter-touch' assistance, such as involvement in groups or peer mentoring.

Jill Beaumont, director of community services at Oldham Council, explains: 'We have to have a more tailored offer that is about people building their skills to enable them to better manage their lives rather than professionals taking control. When you have the right conversations with people you start to get to the root cause of the issues. Our work around individuals and

families who were identified as having complex needs found lack of confidence and low self-esteem were common factors. Councils' resources are diminishing and this is about how we work with our residents to give them more independence and confidence. Once they've got that, they can go further and help others, which means we build longer term sustainability. In the past, services have focused on what's going wrong in somebody's life, for example if they are taking drugs or in debt. We want to focus on strengths instead of reinforcing negativity. When people start to think they have positive elements, change is possible.'

Tapping into women's strengths

While Oldham Council's Early Help is a community-wide, all-age scheme, the authority recognises that specialist skills and support may be required for particular groups. This is where The Collective Partnership and Inspire Women Oldham comes in. The Collective and Inspire has been chosen as one of the partners in the Early Help Consortia tasked to deliver the new model because its holistic, person-centred principles complement the council's emphasis on co-production and self reliance.

'Co-production goes way beyond traditional models of consultation,' says Sally Bonnie, director of The Collective Partnership, founder of Inspire (pictured fourth left). 'Co-production happens in the critical middle ground where lived experience of the user of



the service and professional knowledge are combined to design and deliver services that local people want.' Inspire has strong evidence of improvements to emotional, social and physical well-being from bringing women together for its Inspire Pathway self-development programme. 'A woman might see twenty or thirty different agencies through her life, who are all trying to fix her. She may have experienced mental health problems, domestic violence, sexual abuse, drug and alcohol misuse and therefore experienced high levels of interventions. Breaking us into categories of victims and helpers creates an unequal power and limits our belief that only some people have the answers. When we free ourselves from this belief and create a space to listen, to notice what is present, we create a space where women are absolutely capable of self-organising, creating solutions for themselves becoming a powerful asset to their local community in the process,' she says.

Self-management and resilience

Inspire is a Community Interest Company built upon ideas pioneered by Ms Bonnie. She has worked in Oldham for over 10 years, within and alongside the community before producing the Pathway programme. Building Bridges, stage 2 of the Pathway, was winner in the National Women In Housing's Best Project for Innovation and Best Practice awards 2014. Women who take part in the Pathway learn self-management skills and resilience strategies and build a network

of supportive relationships. As well as developing a deeper awareness of self, the programme encourages self organising around issues women care most about, learning by doing, developing a sense of community belonging. Lack of confidence/self esteem was identified as a major factor limiting options for women who embarked on the programme and over the past three years 175 women have engaged on the programme and got involved in community projects and further learning. Many have gone on to help other women by becoming volunteers and associates delivering the Pathway, supporting projects and running the Centre. During just one year, women collectively contributed £46k worth of time in local community projects.

Oldham's Early Help Consortia

Inspire recognised that women in Oldham lacked a voice in influencing services and were falling into categories of victims supported by interventions. As a member of the Early Help Consortia, it can now ensure women's views are taken on board. 'Early Help is creating a space from which local women can begin to take on roles as shapers and leaders of their own services and self-organise around the issues they care most about. This involves local women in a way that brings optimism, helps bring decision-makers closer to communities and enhances community leadership,' according to Ms Bonnie.

Inspire runs a women only space in the town centre in a building provided currently rent-free through the New Charter Partnership. Having a safe, inclusive,

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gender-specific environment enables personal growth and raises aspirations in a borough where mental health is a significant problem amongst women but where women's voices are beginning to be heard.

Feedback from events involving local women's organisations, service users and volunteers has identified a need for a central information point for

women's services in Oldham, where agencies can work together. Inspire recently ran workshops entitled What Women Want for leaders of public and voluntary sector services and for women from across the borough. It is hoped that a Women's Strategic Forum will emerge from the success of these events. Inspire are also finalists in the Lottery Women and Girls Fund.

The local authority says...

Jill Beaumont, director of community services at Oldham Council, is a member of Inspire Women Oldham's steering group. She says:

'Early Help is an asset based approach. It's not telling people what to do - we want the individual to take control. Our Early Help model is a community wide offer, but it recognises that sometimes you need particular supporting groups. Women often need a particular kind of support when they've experienced something harmful like domestic abuse. Bringing women together to help themselves and each other is exactly

what Inspire can do as a key contributor to the Early Help offer. Its particular kind of support means they feel much safer and more able to share their experiences, help each other and take that next step on a positive journey to build confidence and self-esteem. That grows the capacity of women who are making a real difference in communities. We've got great examples where women are making a difference here in Oldham and we want to build on that.'

An Inspire woman says...

'We didn't have a voice before, we were seen as victims by everyone else. This was the space where we became visible, where what had happened to us was seen as a strength not a weakness.'



Inspire Women Oldham: What went right?

- Oldham Council is encouraging innovation in service delivery.
- The council is listening to residents and working with partners in new ways.
- Principles of women centred working complement the council's integrated approach to complex families' needs.
- The council's Early Help model is creating a space from which local women can shape services.
- The council is committed to co-production, which is a key principle of women centred working.
- The council recognises that building women's confidence and capacities can be a valuable community asset.
- Inspire is bringing decision-makers closer to users of services.
- Inspire has grass roots experience of self-help and evidence of success in changing women's lives.
- Inspire develops women's skills and confidence to make a difference in their communities.

Case study

Women's Community Matters, Barrow



Building partnerships where it really matters

When Women's Community Matters Barrow opened its doors in November 2013, it was the first women centre's in Cumbria.

Located in a prime spot in the middle of the town, the centre now welcomes several hundred women a year, who can access support in times of crisis, seek advice on legal, housing, benefits and other issues – or take part in therapeutic activities. More than 300 women with experience of domestic or sexual abuse, mental and physical health problems or involvement in the criminal justice system have completed a personal development programme so far.

Women's Community Matters also serves as a women-centred hub for a long list of agencies locally. It offers a safe space in which to meet adult social care, benefits and Citizens' Advice staff. There are strong links with health services, children's services, housing and police. A female Police Community Support Officer has worked consistently with the centre and built trust among women there. The domestic violence

advice service, LetGo, meets some clients in sound-proofed offices and refers others to the centre, as do Victim Support, sexual violence advisors, health visitors and midwives. Probation Services are co-located at the centre and so far, 33 women have completed Community Orders for unpaid work there.

All of this activity is based around women centred principles, which helps women get to the root of problems and enables long-term change. 'It's about thinking differently,' says centre manager, Rebecca Rawlings (pictured centre). 'We state clearly that we work with 'love, care, compassion and kindness'. A few years ago, that might have been seen as a bit fluffy, but it's now recognised that we have tapped into something real that really works. As a result of putting the right environment, ethos and workers in place, women are able to help themselves and each other. Public sector partners, don't always understand what it's about at first, but when they come to our events and hear real stories from women about how difficult their lives have been →



and the positive changes they've made, professionals and politicians are bowled over. The leader of Barrow Borough Council was so moved, he offered on the spot to write a letter of support for a Lottery bid we were putting together.'

Women's Community Matters was born out of a need identified during a consultancy exercise led by Clare Jones of Women Centred Working. County council, police and the local community safety partnership data on domestic violence, substance misuse and re-offending, plus national research recommending a new way of working with female offenders, provided a strong evidence base for the centre's holistic approach.

Community engagement and consultation continues to shape the centre and its services. A well-attended consultation event was followed up with questionnaires asking what women wanted from the centre, which received 200 responses. 'Confidence building courses proved most popular. Signposting around benefits, support getting back into work and opportunities

for education and social inclusion were also clear requirements. People had strong views that it should be centrally located and on bus route. It was important that it was safe and welcoming with friendly, non-judgemental staff. Excellent feedback so far shows we are giving women what they want,' Ms Rawlings says. 'Suggestions came up I wouldn't have thought of', she adds. For example, local families have received 8,853 free items from a clothes bank set up in response to suggestions from local women.

An ethos of co-production runs throughout Women's Community Matters. Women from the local community currently participate as members, trustees and volunteers – giving 8,849 hours time for free. 'It was very much developed alongside women - everybody involved can see their ideas actually happen, so they feel like they own it,' she says. 'As well as being a powerful resource for vulnerable women, we extend our empowerment ethos to all local women – because supporting each other is where the real magic happens, not from professionals coming up with answers.'

Partners and funding

Partnership working between voluntary and public sector agencies enabled Women's Community Matters to get off the ground and has been crucial to its ongoing success. Centre manager, Rebecca Rawlings was initially seconded from Barrow Borough Council's Community Safety Partnership paid for by Cumbria Probation Trust. The centre now has two full-time and two part-time staff. Income for the last financial year was just over £160k and running costs were £88k.

Keith Johnson, the borough's assistant director for communities, was involved from the outset as a member of the advisory committee, along with senior Police and Clinical Commissioning Group representatives. He was instrumental in securing a venue for the centre in council-owned property on a long term lease at a peppercorn rent. Cumbria County Council paid for insurance and CCTV and the borough and county councils jointly funded a new extension. The Police and Crime Commissioner finances Being, Feeling, Keeping Safe, the thirty-five session support programme for

The local authority says...

Barrow Borough Council's assistant director of communities, Keith Johnson, has responsibility for partnerships working and has been involved in Women's Community Matters from its outset. He says: 'We are delighted to be able to support Women's Community Matters and see it go from strength to strength. We were happy to provide a really excellent base at a peppercorn rent. The borough has challenges in terms of deprivation and we are all paring back our services at a difficult time financially. This means essential services are struggling to cope

with demand and working in real partnership with a strong, well run third sector supplementing statutory services is very important. It's often hard for women to access services as they don't know where to go and one of the big attractions for us was that Women's Community Matters reaches out to them. Its success is being rewarded because its funding bids show spectacular results.'

A Community Matters woman says...

'Being involved with the gardening project has given me my confidence and self-respect back. It has helped me spend more time with my family instead of drinking and spending time with the police.'

women who have been involved in criminal justice, are victims of domestic violence or are otherwise vulnerable. Other funding has come from community safety and neighbourhood management and grants to help meet public sector priorities around tackling poverty, improving education and access to services.

Good results from the women centred model

'It's not just about direct financial help', says Ms Rawlings: 'Barrow Borough Council is suffering budget cuts, but does lots of small things that have little direct cost but mean a great deal to us. Having firm partnership in place puts you in a better position when approaching other funders. Being able to show good results from the women centred model at WomenCentre Calderdale and Kirklees also helped when talking to funders at the start.' Borough and town councillors serve alongside community representatives as the organisation's trustees. As a borough which has retained its stock of 3000 council homes, a pilot project to provide supported housing for victims of domestic abuse is also in operation.



Women's Community Matters, Barrow: What went right?



- The case for new services was built on a strong evidence base using local data and national research.
- Barrow Borough Council provided a venue in central location on a long lease at a peppercorn rent.
- The new centre drew upon expertise from a well-established women's centre elsewhere.
- Services have been shaped around what local women really wanted and needed.
- The centre provides a hub where agencies can come together and ease pressure on statutory bodies.
- The partners were prepared to be brave and do things differently.
- The holistic nature of women centred working means projects can be matched with a variety of funding streams.

Case study

The Way Forward, Calderdale



A new way of helping young women move forward

A pilot project in West Yorkshire is breaking new ground in working with vulnerable young women – and showing how accessing the right kind of help at a crucial point can stop problems escalating.

The Way Forward is an example of how agencies can work together to shape support and around personal situations, avoid duplication and stop people slipping down cracks between services. The Way Forward is run by WomenCentre Calderdale and Kirklees and funded by Paul Hamlyn Foundation and Lankelly Chase Foundation. It began in January 2013 and 135 young women from Calderdale, aged between 16 and 24, have been involved. Many of these young women have gone on to jobs, university courses and are leading healthy, independent lives as a result of developing confidence and coping strategies.

Basing the project on women centred, holistic understanding of young women's situations means support fits around the reality of each person's particular circumstances. Flexibility on the part of the funders allowed the Way Forward to evolve according to young women's own priorities. This meant the role of the frontline engagement worker evolved into one of providing a consistent point of contact, case work and emotional support once these priorities became apparent. Engagement worker, Anne-Marie Gallagher,

explains: 'You provide them with a safety net, you can reduce the amount of drinking and drugs they are taking, they're not as at risk, you're providing more safety, you find them housing, all that kinds of stuff...the ultimate impact is that you can save lives because they can be a rock bottom point when they come here and it's about building their resilience.'

Evaluation by researchers from Leeds Beckett University over a three year period has identified significant improvements in relationships, education and employment and avoidance of unsafe sex, substance misuse and other risk-taking behaviour among young women who have been through the project's self-development journey. The report concludes: 'The Way Forward provides a good example of preventative, early intervention work with young women from which critical success criteria can be identified. The whole approach proved to be effective, with a skilled engagement worker linked to an independent gendered organisation providing holistic, person centred support, without fixed criteria, using proactive engagement techniques and within a multi-agency context.'

Multi-agency, early intervention

The foresight shown by local agencies in working together to shape support around individuals has been an important factor in the Way Forward's success,



according to Leeds Beckett’s evaluation. The project has been overseen by a multi-agency steering group, which draws together local knowledge and provides space for multi-agency problem solving. Steering group members include representatives of: Calderdale Council’s young peoples services, homeless services, the youth offending team, housing associations and substance misuse services.

Information sharing

Information sharing enables professionals to work more efficiently and avoids duplication. Calderdale Council runs fortnightly Early Intervention Panels in four localities as part of its Early Intervention Strategy. Attendance at these panels by the Way Forward project manager meant girls and young women in high risk family situations were referred to the project, among other services. Referrals to the Way Forward also come from schools, social services, young people’s services, safeguarding officers, health visitors, education welfare, mental health teams, police, family and friends. In turn, the project refers young women to young carers’, bereavement, rape trauma or other specialist services.

The uniquely flexible role of one full-time and one part-time engagement worker in responding to complex cases requires skilled supervision and the project is embedded in a multi-skilled team at WomenCentre, which has high standards of casework and robust safeguarding practice.

The Way Forward has captured learning on systems

change that can be transferred to suit other locations. There is a strong business case for doing so. Leeds Beckett University’s evaluation found the preventative nature of the work could mean long-term outcomes resulting in cost savings from a borough-wide perspective. The report estimated savings from working with young women before their needs escalate could include, for example: £59 per hour social worker time; £52k for a looked after child; or £15k for drug-related health and social care costs.

Voices of young women experiencing family crises, homelessness, domestic violence, sexual abuse, self-harm, or other problems often go unheard. One of the pilot’s aims is to prompt wider service innovation by taking their views on board. Clare Jones, WomenCentre’s national lead on Women Centred Working, says: ‘The are fantastic services in the area, but the Way Forward offered a new space for holistic work. As a test-bed, we can explore more effective ways of meeting the needs of girls and young women and we’ve been able to talk to the local authority in ways we hadn’t before. This project has taken us to a far deeper understanding of the systemic barriers that need to be overcome to improve outcomes.’

Transition between children’s and adults’ services was found to be the point when young women are most likely to fall through the net. At a time of severe budget cuts and service reductions, the project has worked with young women whose problems did not meet thresholds for statutory intervention, or whose

The local authority says...

Carol Stone, Early Intervention Service manager at Calderdale Council, comments: ‘The project has worked in depth with some extremely vulnerable young women and has been a valuable addition to the range of services available to them. Its steering group and evaluation have raised some useful

discussion points about the nature of engagement with young people, and regarding multi-agency working. Hopefully these will give pointers for developing practice in the future.’

A young women from The Way Forward says...

‘I wasn’t passed from pillar to post like I’d been in the past. Having one person to work alongside you who never gives up on you is what really makes a difference. The engagement worker listens and listens and listens some more and makes me feel like I’ve got a future and have a choice.’

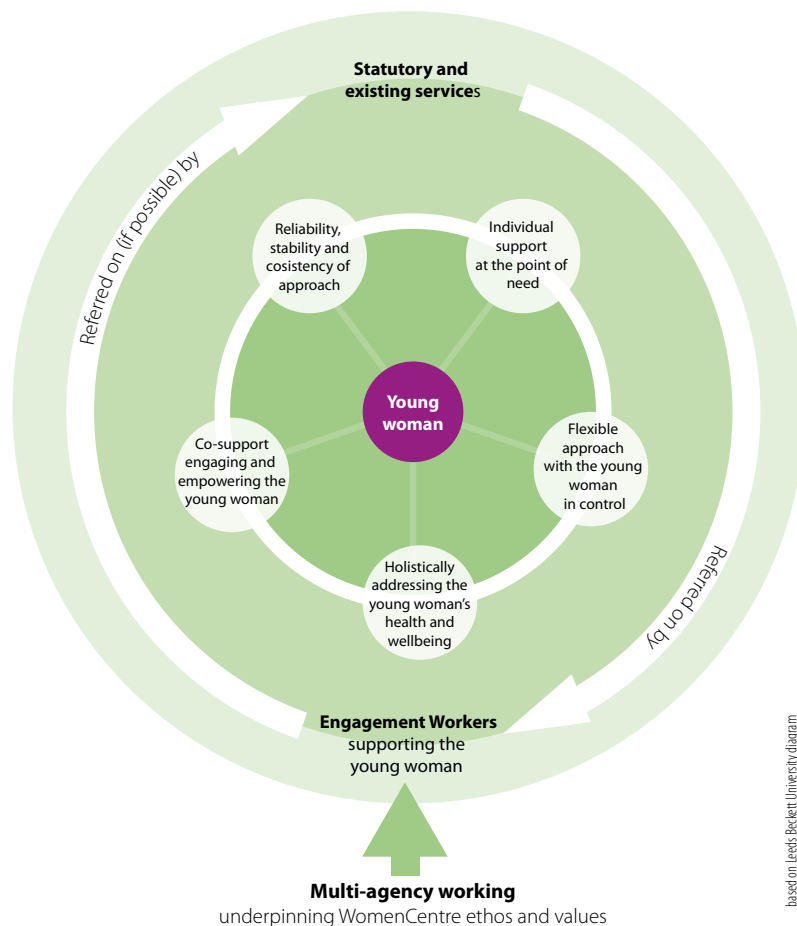
difficulties heightened whilst awaiting statutory support. A significant number of young women using The Way Forward were also living with effects of past trauma and unable to receive therapeutic intervention in a way they found helpful. The project has contributed to an OFSTED inspection and commissioners from the local young people's and children and families services have attended shared learning events. Young women from the project have produced publicity materials, spoken at national events and met with Calderdale council's director of children's services.

Advice UK, which works with organisations to understand systems from a user's perspective, has been tracking Way Forward cases to explore potential for change at a local level.

Continuing the Way Forward project in Calderdale and extending it into Kirklees is part of a WomenCentre bid to the Big Lottery Women and Girls Programme.

Whilst local circumstances always vary, steering group members and Leeds Beckett researchers agreed that core features of the Way Forward could be readily adapted to suit other parts of the country.

The Way Forward Women Centred Model



The Way Forward, Calderdale: What went right?

- A willingness among partners to explore new ways of working.
- Keeping women at the heart of the project means support is shaped around their needs.
- Funders allowed the project to evolve flexibly in response to the reality of women's lives.
- A multi-agency steering group included council, housing and substance misuse team members
- The Way Forward manager attended Calderdale Council's Early Intervention Panels.
- Information sharing between partners meant duplication was avoided.
- WomenCentre provided high quality supervision needed for working flexibly in sensitive situations.
- The project recognised potential of young women at risk to develop confidence and future resilience.
- Evaluation by Leeds Beckett University identified cost savings from preventing problems escalating.
- The quality and skill of staff working alongside young women in a gender sensitive environment.

Making the business case for women centred working

Delivering value

Looking at the costs and benefits of women centred support for a real case illustrates the impact of assistance by The Way Forward project. This puts the financial case for working in a holistic and gender specific way by showing how tailored support at crucial points prevented Sarah and her son Harry* requiring much more costly interventions. Whilst not a comprehensive analysis, even such estimates clearly demonstrate how savings from adopting a women centred approach can greatly outweigh costs.

Sarah's story

Sarah is now 21 but was first referred to The Way Forward when 19. She has suffered sexual abuse as a child and had had two violent long term relationships since then. She has a son, Harry, who was two at the time of referral. Sarah was using drugs and her lifestyle was mostly chaotic, although she was trying to be a good mother for Harry. Her circle of friends were also living chaotically and she felt anxious and fearful in her home. Sarah was frequently in a state of distress, self-harmed and suffered from post traumatic stress disorder.

The engagement worker from The Way Forward invested a lot of time in building contact and trust with Sarah. Over two years she supported her with rehousing to a new area to build a new circle of friends. She enabled Sarah to talk about her past abuse as well as controlling behavior of her current boyfriend and her concerns about lack of appropriate care and safety for her son on his weekend stays with his father. Sarah was referred to the Freedom Programme (surviving domestic abuse) within WomenCentre as well as to Community Mental Health Services. She received support around sexual health and advocacy with ongoing tenancy issues. A year after initial referral to mental health

services for trauma related intervention Sarah was at last referred to a psychologist. Sarah's journey was a roller-coaster of steps towards a more positive life and then periods of psychological distress and confusion, which led to further episodes of risky behaviour. After two years, she had managed to overcome numerous challenges around positive parenting, developing safe personal boundaries in relationships, managing her home and enrolling on a college access course.

Without the level of engagement and support from the Way Forward engagement worker, it is likely that Sarah would have remained below service thresholds and would not have attracted the support she needed until safeguarding concerns were raised with regards to Harry's safety and welfare. It is likely that Sarah would spiral downwards under this pressure into even higher levels of drugs use and other harmful behaviours.

In Sarah's own words...

"I have been given the tools to see not only what I am capable of but what I have already achieved, just how resilient I am and most importantly how I deserve to be treated. When I was first asked what made The Way Forward different I didn't know where to start. Before I became involved with the project my life was chaos, I was helpless and desperate. Then my engagement worker came along and suddenly it was like somebody had hold of me and they weren't going to let me fall again. I was never judged or told what to do, never pushed and unlike other places I wasn't passed from pillar to post, she was there to stay."

* Sarah and Harry are pseudonyms

Costing the case

Costs over two years

Engagement, advocacy and support work	£2,852
Supervision, risk assessment and management	£412
WomenCentre overhead	£640
Freedom Programme	£200
Multiagency steering group	£16

TOTAL COSTS

£4,120

Local Authority savings over two years

Drugs misuse services	£4,541
Retaining custody of child (avoiding care)	£52,676
Domestic violence-related services (estimated 3 serious incidents in 2 years)	£11,824

TOTAL SAVINGS

£69,041

Changing cultures, changing lives



What can councils do?

We know local authorities are up against major challenges in meeting statutory responsibilities and managing risks within a context of budget cuts. But women centred working does not necessarily require extra resources. It can be more about changing cultures and streamlining processes. Adopting a women centred ethos can help service providers get to the bottom of 'what matters' for women and understand why the same families circle round agencies and end up requiring costly crisis interventions. Evidence from the Women Centred Working initiative and other sources suggests women centred thinking can prove cost effective because it gets to the root of deep-seated, interwoven problems. There are also ways in which local authorities can support women centred initiatives without spending much, if any, money.

Some practical starting points

There are some simple and practical starting points councils can take in considering what benefits women centred working might bring in their communities.

- One good starting point can be to think about women centred approaches as an important additional element within existing agendas and priorities. This is of particular value in early intervention, child protection and family focused work. Where the prevalence and impact of childhood and adult abuse may be underestimated, a trauma informed perspective on such services might be useful. Trauma informed reviews may also be of value to multi-agency arrangements such as Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conferences for Domestic Violence and Multi Agency Safeguarding Hubs. Recognising distinct gendered needs has already proved effective in Integrated Offender Management Hubs across the country.
- Another possible starting point is identifying women with high levels of complex needs

and undertaking a piece of investigative work to develop clearer understandings to inform service design, as has happened with the Way Forward project. Mapping women's life courses and journeys gives a clearer understanding of experiences and responses by local services. Local authorities can use their place-based oversight to co-ordinate innovation and collaboration, bringing departments and organisations together to explore new ideas. Sometimes having a senior officer, elected member or service manager championing women centred thinking may be all that is needed to kick-start innovation.

- Councils can also gain a lot from closer relations with existing women's organisations locally. Finding space for a new dialogue with these organisations outside of respective commissioner/provider roles can be an invaluable source of knowledge. It can deepen understanding of the ethos, environment and skill-sets that benefit women facing multiple disadvantages. This has happened in some areas, where councils have consulted with local women's centres to inform sections of their Joint Strategic Needs Assessments.
- Joining up what already exists locally around women centred service improvement can be a valuable process at a strategic, commissioning and service delivery level. The important thing is involving women themselves at all stages. Whilst women who are in the most need may engage with a range of services, there is often little opportunity to share their views on what really matters to them, their frustrations with existing systems and what would really make a difference to them and their families. Doing things in a woman centred way enables their voices to be heard.
- Councils can celebrate women as assets and recognise projects where women are creating their own solutions and supporting each other in diverse groups.

Suggestions for taking forward women centred solutions in your local area

- ❑ Explore fully where gendered working might complement existing approaches in your area, such as personalisation, co-production, resilience-building and prevention.
- ❑ Examine your existing data-sets to identify where gender considerations may be relevant.
- ❑ Identify a champion to lead on women centred working within your authority.
- ❑ Identify where women already act as key assets within your area.
- ❑ Local authorities can use their place-based oversight to co-ordinate innovation and collaboration, bringing departments and organisations together to explore new ideas.
- ❑ Raise awareness and gain support for women centred working at a multi-agency strategic level e.g. in Health and Wellbeing Boards, Safeguarding Boards and Clinical Commissioning Groups.
- ❑ Identify women with high levels of complex need and women's champions at leadership and community levels and bring them together in a women's leadership group.
- ❑ Embed women centred principles within multi-agency service delivery hubs.
- ❑ Celebrate the strengths of a commitment to women, for example with awareness raising events at strategic leadership and community levels.
- ❑ Work together with women's specialist services, centres, groups and women themselves to co-produce more effective ways forward.
- ❑ Listen to the voices of local women when designing and delivering services.
- ❑ Increase understanding of the ethos and skills set involved in women centred working through placements within projects applying these principles – especially where your area has the benefit of a women's centre or other women's organisation.
- ❑ Reconsider the values of holistic women centred approaches as offered through women's centres and consider the value of integrated commissioning options.
- ❑ Support the set up of new women's groups and centres as a community asset – through strategic involvement, small set up grant, premises and equipment.

What can Women Centred Working offer local authorities?

- Informal advice and conversations about women centred approaches
- Resources, information and presentations to support women centred approaches
- Strategic and community level presentations and workshops
- Learning and training events
- Development consultancy support
- Implementation consultancy support



Contact us

If you would like further information on women centred working or any of the suggestions listed above, please contact:

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Women Centred Working is an initiative to encourage the design and delivery of more effective services for women who are facing multiple disadvantages

www.womencentredworking.com