

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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Women Centred Working

Introduction



“Women centred solutions should appeal to heads as well as hearts... There is compelling evidence that women centred ways of doing things can benefit statutory agencies and voluntary bodies - and ultimately save the public purse millions.”

Welcome to Women Centred Working. The Women Centred Working initiative has arisen as a result of decades of experience supporting women in the most difficult situations to make positive, long-term changes to their lives. The initiative is a chance to show how the women centred way of doing things can help unlock solutions to complex problems facing women with multiple disadvantages – and prompt more effective ways of working on a wider scale.

In 2003, WomenCentre in West Yorkshire was one of the first locations in the country to offer vulnerable women the ‘one stop shop’ tailored support they desperately need. We were heartened that our approach was recognised at national level, particularly in the Women’s Mental Health Strategy, legal services planning, as a national social inclusion pilot and with the 2007 Corston Report’s recommendation of community alternatives we pioneered for women in the criminal justice system.

As joint chief executives of WomenCentre Calderdale and Kirklees, Angela Everson and myself developed complementary areas of expertise. Angela now has organisational leadership and continues to take forward the sustainability, quality and development of WomenCentre.

The Women Centred Working initiative is enabling me to focus on the national influence side of our work.

Having seen tangible improvements in the lives of tens of thousands of women at WomenCentre and at other places and projects around the country, I identified successful components of gendered working in *Women Centred Working - Defining an Approach*. Many elements of women centred working are similar to those found in other enabling and supportive environments and I believe they are readily transferable.

The Women Centred Working initiative is keen to share knowledge women of centred approaches developed over many years. This publication offers an overview of ‘women centred’ principles and showcases good practice. It outlines the need for gendered solutions within the current context of growing demands on services coupled with budget constraints. It demonstrates the benefits and puts the case for investment as a way of saving money – and preventing spirals of abuse and deprivation blighting future generations. It offers suggestions as to how commissioners, service providers, funders and professionals can use Women Centred Working to help meet demands upon them.

While women centred solutions undoubtedly work for women

facing multiple disadvantage, they should appeal to heads as well as hearts. The principles of the approach can be aligned with latest thinking on partnership working, pooled budgets, personalisation and resource efficiency agendas. There is compelling evidence that women centred ways of doing things can benefit statutory agencies and voluntary bodies at national and local level - and ultimately save the public purse millions.

The Women Centred Working initiative 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’. Whereas policies tend to be formed at national level and implemented locally, this is a rare opportunity to take practice that is proven to work at grass roots and encourage its roll-out on a wider scale.

Over the next eighteen months, Women Centred Working will be sharing resources to assist in the design and delivery of women centred solutions.

I hope this is a starting point in a journey towards innovative thinking that will make women centred ways of working a key consideration in planning and providing services in future.

Clare Jones, *National lead Women Centred Working*

The need for women centred solutions



Multiple issues, multiple services

Women facing multiple disadvantages often lead chaotic and complex lives. At any time, they may be dealing with a combination of one or more issues such as domestic violence, offending behaviour, physical and mental illness, substance misuse, unemployment or homelessness.

To get support, women in this situation then need to access complex and often fragmented services, which may be delivered across a range of organisations in different locations (see diagram). It's a system that professionals often struggle to understand, let alone a vulnerable woman who may be in crisis.

The way public services are structured and funded contributes to this confusing picture for women with severe multiple needs. Professionals often work in silos, within and between public organisations. Funding may come from a range of different sources and may be time limited to specific projects, or be cut year on year. 'Payment by results' schemes often emphasise narrow, single outcomes which don't tell the full story of a woman with multiple needs. Charities, professional groups

and academics also often work in isolation from one another. This limits the 'critical mass' of advocacy and research to influence policies, funding and commissioning of services with a clear focus on women.

The good work of those projects that do exist (some of which are featured here) can be undone by seemingly endless service re-organisations and funding cuts in different agencies. This wastes the investment, know-how and partnerships that have been painstakingly built up, often over years.

Why do we need gendered and 'trauma informed' services?

Most public services are provided for both men and women. In some of them, women and girls may be in a minority and so are receiving services designed by men, for men. While both genders may face multiple issues, women are much more likely to have experienced childhood and domestic abuse and trauma and to be the main carers for children.

Dr. Stephanie Covington, a clinician and author based in the USA, is an internationally

recognised expert on gender and trauma. Her research looks at issues such as substance abuse, where services have traditionally been developed based on the needs of addicted men. The focus for intervention is on the addiction, with the assumption that other issues will be resolved later by other agencies or through the process of recovery. Yet she found that treatment for addicted women is likely to be ineffective unless it acknowledges the realities of women's lives. In one of the first studies on addicted women and trauma, 74% of the addicted women reported sexual abuse, 52% reported physical abuse, and 72% reported emotional abuse.

In the UK, research from the Institute of Criminal Policy Research in 2013 found that a high number of magistrates sit infrequently, meaning that they see very few women offenders. They rely on their legal clerks and court probation staff for information on women-specific services and get little or no training on the issues affecting women offenders. This is despite the fact that research shows the value of providing integrated services in women-only settings, particularly for women who have suffered sexual and physical violence.

In Britain, one in four women experience physical violence from a

Principles in action:

Safe, supportive, accessible, professional



A safe haven

Experience has shown that physical environment and organisational culture go hand in hand in seeking solutions to complex problems experienced by vulnerable women.

Being able to access support from specially trained people within a safe, women only environment is crucial in supporting women who are experiencing difficulties. A women only space offers a safe haven for those who have been affected by violence and abuse and feel afraid and anxious. Women who are concerned about their safety and security – and that of their children – are highly sensitive to issues of confidentiality and this is given careful consideration in providing women centred support.

Women centred working means creating an environment and ethos that enables women to build a

sense of their own identity and self-esteem. This means treating every woman who walks through the door in a welcoming, non-judgemental, respectful way. It also means removing any barriers that might hinder their access to support, including considering practicalities such as language, literacy, location, culture, timing, transport and childcare.

A specialist skill-set

Whilst remaining responsive and flexible, effective women centred working requires high levels of professionalism. Elements identified as critical for organisations operating in a women centred way include: strong governance and accountability, effective management and monitoring systems, commitment to equality and diversity, ongoing organisational

improvement and innovation.

Achieving positive outcomes from the women centred approach requires a specific skill-set to be developed among professionals and volunteers who are committed to the women centred ethos. Staff are trained in a basic core skill-set which covers: relationship building, confidentiality, domestic abuse awareness, information giving and signposting, establishing professional boundaries, listening and communication. Workers who first engage with service users require expertise to build trust, elicit information and assess risk. This calls for a genuine rapport and empathy and understanding of areas to include within a holistic assessment, which can be added to, amended and paced to suit the individual's changing situation over time.

Pioneering women centred solutions



Angela Everson, chief executive of WomenCentre Calderdale and Kirklees

WomenCentre Calderdale and Kirklees, which is now one of the largest women's centre in the UK, has grown from a centre first set up by local women in 1985. Each year it serves some 3,500 women who are dealing with domestic violence, poor mental and physical health, poverty, unemployment, homelessness, substances misuse and offending behaviour. The organisational design of WomenCentre makes it an ideal community space in which to help empower women who are in the gravest difficulties – particularly those who have multiple needs and feel poorly served by existing services – to get their lives back on track.

Understanding the inter-relationship between problems experienced by vulnerable women, and recognising limitations of existing support systems, led WomenCentre to establish one of the first female centred 'one stop shops' in the country in 2003, with funding from National Lottery. WomenCentre buildings in Halifax, Huddersfield and Dewsbury house a 'seamless team' of specially trained professions and volunteers, who provide information and signposting, legal advice, advocacy, counselling, specialist interventions, community-based alternatives for offending behaviour, support groups, drop-in sessions and a creche.

The centres serve as a hub offering a community access point to an extensive range of services, activities and specially targeted support. This includes: the Freedom Programme, a weekly support group for women affected by domestic abuse now or in the past; support for children and young people affected by domestic violence; the Maze Project project for families; one-to-one therapeutic work; holistic support for mental health and well-being; a specialist service for refugee and asylum-seeking women; and a monthly group for lesbian or bisexual women. As well as activities to help build their confidence, self-esteem and emotional resilience, women

participate in sessions to improve their computer skills, money management and employability. The Evolve service has pioneered women centred models of working with women involved in the criminal justice system or at risk of offending.

WomenCentre has a strong track record of influencing policy and practice locally, regionally and nationally. It has received national awards for work with female offenders and been an influential partner with the Ministry of Justice to further develop community alternatives and prevention of reoffending across the country. In 2007, WomenCentre was chosen as one of 12 national pilots to work with Adults Facing Chronic Social Exclusion.

Evaluation by MATRIX and the University of Huddersfield has highlighted the value of an approach of this nature around safeguarding women and children. As well as responsibility for employees, volunteers and service users in three locations, the role of WomenCentre chief executive, Angela Everson, includes partnership working at operational and strategic levels across two West Yorkshire boroughs and collaboration with regional and national partners to improve policy and practice on a wider scale.

'You never feel awkward here. You walk in and feel welcome and relaxed. You're just a human being - you get respect and you don't get judged...It's safe and I've made good friends - it's like a family here.'
WomenCentre service user

'I started dealing with domestic violence as a volunteer fifteen years ago and I've seen WomenCentre grow from one room and keep growing. It's a great place to work. It has a good atmosphere, is child friendly and flexible and always evolving and you get lots of training. You learn a lot here and it's made me grow as a person. I get huge satisfaction from seeing that we get genuine results.'
Case worker at WomenCentre

'It's warmer and more informal here, but in no way less professional. There's a very high level of professionalism but it's accessible for any women to come here. There are less barriers between workers and service users.'
WomenCentre counsellor

Principles in action:

Holistic, tailored, multi-agency



The whole person at the centre

Many of the positive changes that have originated in women's centres over the years have been possible because of a commitment to understanding the reality of people's situations, rather than trying to fit them into traditional patterns of service provision.

The women centred way of working is holistic. This means getting to the heart of things by viewing each woman as a whole person and understanding the particular issues going on in her life. It means offering 'one stop shop' access to information and tailoring wrap-around support packages to respond to the specific needs of the individual and her family.

Joined up solutions

Navigating a way through such a variety of health, social care, benefits and other services can be overwhelming for women who are experiencing abuse and trauma and a series of issues may be impacting upon each other.

Whereas women with complex needs can be known to a number of separate drugs and alcohol, homelessness or mental health services, women centred working aims to cut across service divisions and focus on the needs of the individual. For this reason, the women centred approach integrates funding from multiple sources wherever possible and creates partnerships between professionals and agencies based around real needs and effective solutions, rather than organisational boundaries.

'Some services say "we can only deal with this one thing and you'll have to go somewhere else for that other thing"...but we can give help with practical as well as emotional issues, which tend to go together. If someone goes to the housing office because they are depressed and at risk of losing their home, for example, the housing office will only deal with the housing problem, whereas we can offer support in dealing with mental illness as well, which helps get the the root of problems.'

Case worker

Finding a better way forward for girls and young women

Organisations in Calderdale are working together on a multi-agency project offering tailored support for girls and young women with complex needs.

The Way Forward project aims to build resilience among young women and girls who may be living chaotic and painful lives, through positive intervention to protect them from future life scenarios including drugs and alcohol, abusive relationships, unemployment, poor physical and mental health, early parenthood and low level crime.

The project aims to bring together all relevant local agencies to identify and engage with girls and young women who are slipping between cracks in services. Young women involved are being found to benefit from an approach based on a holistic understanding of their lives and support from professionals who work alongside them towards building a brighter future.

Evaluation of the first phase of the project by Leeds Metropolitan University stressed the value of one consistent point of contact where trust and rapport can be developed and the 'Engagement Worker'



role was found to be vital in this project.

As one referrer commented: 'The door's always open. Now that's something that a lot of young people have not experienced, consistency of worker. It isn't necessarily something we could always promise because in every sector people have to move on, but within the statutory sector, it's designed to throw people and children, young people, from professional to professional.'

The project is also addressing gaps in provision by working with young people who may not meet the criteria for statutory services, which were reported to only work

with individuals demonstrating high levels of need. As a steering group member commented: 'You've got this marvellous statutory provision, but there's this swathe of young women in between who are going to come to those services eventually – but when it's possibly too late and interventions would be ineffective.'

An example of one young woman who used the project demonstrates the importance of developing holistic and integrated solutions around the specific needs of the individual.

She had experienced domestic violence and was dealing with alcohol dependency, emotional and health issue along with inadequate housing and had asked her own parents to care for her children. While she had been involved with several agencies, building a trusting relationship with one dedicated worker who was skilled in the holistic, women centred approach enabled her to identify her own priorities, take control of her housing situation, access family support and build confidence to attend medical appointments. She subsequently reported that she had reduced her alcohol consumption and felt much more able to cope and meet her children's needs.

'This sort of tailored support is innovative. We take a very flexible approach because problems are complex and people get overwhelmed having to go to lots of different places. Some people can have 15 different workers and be sent from pillar to post and that wastes time and resources and causes more stress.'

Administrator

'Being a one stop shop really helps because people come here for all different reasons and whatever the issue is, there is usually someone in the building who can help. It's often a big step coming here and we want to make sure no one goes away empty handed. We try to give every woman who walks through the door something – we take that extra time and that builds up trust.'

Project worker

'It is about getting to the bottom of a problem, and the trauma that often lies at the base of different problems, and getting below the layers to find solutions. Because it's a one stop shop, it might start with someone coming here because they are struggling to pay a gas bill, then it turns out that they are experiencing domestic abuse and they end up accessing counselling or joining a group that literally changes their life.'

Counsellor

Principles in action:

Empowerment, co-production



Tapping into knowledge

Women centred working is based on well-documented knowledge that service users are the most qualified people to find solutions to their own problems.

Women who use services have best knowledge of the issues affecting them and tapping into that knowledge can help them find their own answers to complex problems.

A core aspiration of women's centres is to build confidence to increase a woman's self-belief and ability to make positive changes. Putting women engaging with services at the centre of decision-making has been shown to be effective in helping escape dependency on drugs and alcohol,

transform their own mental and physical health and develop new skills.

The expertise and dedication of women's centre staff helps build a bond of trust that enables women to begin to unlock difficult situations. Because many service users go on to become volunteers at women's centres and many of staff at women's centres are former volunteers, this creates an empowering environment and a virtuous circle of skill-sharing.

Building on capabilities

'Co-production' has become an important concept in the aspiration to deliver more effective services

generally and it forms a core component in women centred working.

A report on co-production by the New Economics Foundation in 2010 described it in the following way: 'People's needs are better met when they are involved in an equal and reciprocal relationship with professionals and others, working together to get things done.' Key characteristics of co-production that are closely aligned with women centred working include: recognising people as assets; building on their existing capabilities; promoting mutuality and reciprocity; developing peer support networks; breaking down barriers between professionals and recipients; and facilitating rather than delivering.'



Coping with complexity

The way in which one young woman in West Yorkshire was encouraged to start finding ways through a difficult and complex situation is among many examples of women centred working in practice.

The woman was living apart from her son, in the midst of a court case regarding her child, suffering from poor mental health and trying to deal with practical housing issues.

Seven months of intensive support began with a trained

WomenCentre professional listening to her in a non-judgemental way to fully understand her situation and liaising to improve a contentious relationship with social services. Work around stress and coping mechanisms was undertaken to help her deal with the pressures in her life including accessing mental health services.

Following on from this, referrals to other services within WomenCentre Calderdale and Kirklees enabled her to establish support networks as well as

attending courses on self-esteem and counselling sessions. Her worker has liaised with solicitors and supported her with attending appointments and meetings with social services and foster carers as well as supporting her emotionally through the court experience.

The woman in question is still dealing with legal issues, but reports that she has built more confidence to cope with situations, is now considering her next steps and is aware of additional support she can access.

'It's about empowering women so it's important not to do everything for them but to help them make informed choices. It's about working together to find a way forward - not telling people what to do. So it's a two way process. It's up to the individual. Some are not ready for change when they first come but then something just clicks and they want to make changes.'

Case worker

'The staff are there to help if you want it but they don't tell you what to do. There are things you think are normal and you come here and see it's not normal to be treated like that. It's good to be able to talk to people in similar circumstances. I know now how it can just be a vicious circle. There have been times when it felt like it would have been much easier just to go back to my partner even though he abused me, but coming here gave me other options and has changed my life.'

Service user

'I started coming here six or seven years ago and bonded with some of the women straight away. It really helps to relate to other women and have people to talk to about my mental health and eating disorder and addictions. I've attend therapy and different groups here, do sewing and have taken up exercise and it's helped me to be who I am today - my whole lifestyle has changed for the better.'

Service user



Principles in action:

Effective, outcome-focused, evidenced



Pioneering effective alternatives

There is strong evidence to show that services in general are more effective when designed around the needs of users. The women centred approach builds upon this principle in a gendered way – and a growing body of research is testament to the tangible outcomes it can deliver.

The importance of women's centres as perfect locations in which to provide holistic services for low-risk women offenders with complex needs was recognised in Baroness Corston's influential report *Women with Vulnerabilities in the Criminal Justice System* in 2007. The review identified the value of community based alternatives - including Asha, WomenCentre, Anawim, the 218 Centre and WomenCentre in West

Yorkshire - and recommended their expansion nationally. The Ministry of Justice, Corston Independent Funders' Coalition, Women's Diversionary Fund and National Offender Management Services have since funded a series of women's community services around the UK.

Assessing the outcomes

Women at the Centre, an impact report on women centred services published by the Centre for Welfare Reform in 2011, found that:

- 80% of women accessing women centred support showed substantial improvements in mental health

- almost all the women reported a significant improvement in their life as a whole, quantifying this as an average 66% improvement from when they first engaged
- women also identified improvements across many other dimensions – such as relationships, work, housing, neighbourhood, money, physical health and relationships with their children
- re-offending among those accessing women centred support was cut to less than 5%

Two further pieces of research have added weight to evidence that the gendered way of working produces favourable outcomes.

In 2012, the New Economics

Foundation's *Women's Community Services: A Wise Commission*, concluded: 'Women's community services can significantly improve the well-being of vulnerable women, and in doing so help them achieve long-term changes in their lives. The services offer women the key tools they need to begin to make changes – a feeling of being more in control of their lives, supportive relationships, a sense that their lives have meaning, and hope for the future.'

Last year's Institute for Criminal Policy Research evaluation *The development and impact of*

community services for women offenders describes women's centres as viable and effective settings for providing interventions. Having examined six community-based services for women offenders, it described them as 'innovative in their linking of third and statutory sector, criminal justice, health and welfare and women-specific agencies'. The research showed how a number of women had moved on to mainstream adult education settings, volunteer placements and work as a result.

Most recently, *Women and Girls at Risk: evidence across the life*

course commissioned by Barrow Cadbury Trust, Lankelly Chase Foundation and the Pilgrim Trust and produced by DMSS, looked at the lives of women and girls who experience poor outcomes, such as offending, homelessness, prostitution and exploitation, chronic mental health and substance abuse. Initial evidence from service evaluations and research involving women at risk supported the model of integrated, holistic, one-stop, women-centred services.

Improved outcomes from community alternatives

Evolve is a WomenCentre service commissioned by West Yorkshire Probation Trust to work with women who are involved in the criminal justice system.

Since 2007, Evolve has been delivering support and interventions to women who are at pre-court stage, on bail or have been cautioned by the Police, remanded into custody or given a Probation Community Order. Evolve works closely with partners such as West Yorkshire Community Rehabilitation Company and the National Probation Service and delivers community sentencing options alongside supporting women to make positive changes in their lives. Women take part in one-

to-one sessions, group activities and skills development.

Performance monitoring over a six month period showed that at least 83% of the women Evolve worked with completed their Community Order successfully, whilst at least 85% of women on community sentences achieved improved scores in relation to the needs identified in their supervision plan.

One example of positive outcomes from this approach is the case of a 47 year old woman who was a long-term heroin user. She was referred to Evolve after being charged with theft, having a history of shoplifting to fund her heroin use. Her abusive partner was also

a heroin addict and forced her to have sex with his friends for money to buy drugs.

As a result of the referral, she was supported to access counselling, health care, and rebuild her life. She said: 'I've tried to come off the heroin before but no one ever looked at why I got into it in the first place. Now I have left my partner and am coming to WomenCentre, I am starting to look at my past. I have been on the methadone programme for longer than ever and feel that I am over the worst. I haven't needed to steal and am really determined to stay well. I have never had support like this before.'

'I was on the receiving end of domestic violence for years and eventually just snapped and ended up with a probation order, so I came here and I take part in all sorts of different groups. If I hadn't come here I would probably have been locked up. I was in a bit of a mess. It's not just the physical stuff but all the head stuff too and I've come to understand all that. I'm strong enough now to tell him to go away.'
Evolve service user

'Probation offices can be scary for women and intervention here can have better long term outcomes because we look at the reasons why someone commits an offence and try to work with them on that, instead of labelling or judging.'
Evolve case worker

'Women hold the key to their own futures within themselves. Despite the incredible pressures and barriers that many women experience, I witness through all the work we do huge amounts of courage, care and resilience of women supporting other women, seeing the good in each other and the reality of each others' lives more clearly than their own and helping each other make positive decisions.'
Manager

Principles in action:

Preventative and cost effective

A lower cost option

Early intervention is good news for public and voluntary services as well as for individuals and families using women's centres – as it makes the woman centred approach cost effective in the immediate and long term.

Accessing the right sort of assistance at a critical point in a vulnerable woman's life can prevent problems spiralling out of control and also reduce negative impacts on future generations.

The women centred way of doing things can be a low-cost option because it can combine funding streams and prevent duplication among agencies working with families regarded as the most challenging to support. There is also strong evidence to suggest a good return on investment in terms of social value and savings from reduced demand on health, reoffending and housing.

A year-long research collaboration between New Economics Foundation (nef) and five women's community services found that helping women make positive changes in their lives can help reduce demands on state services including police, courts and offender management, prisons, social services, primary and emergency healthcare and housing. Over a three-month period, 44% of women demonstrated a measurable increase in well-being with improvements in; meaning and purpose, relationships, optimism and autonomy, according to their report *A wise commission*. Each of these aspects of well-being are important determinants of long-term outcomes in terms of reoffending,

Grant-holders estimated savings of £1.62m based on a reduced demand on health services, housing and reoffending as a result of preventative intervention.

health and impacts on children.

The cost of providing community-based services to women with complex, multiple needs has been found to be low compared with traditional sentencing. National Offender Management Service figures priced a prison place at £49k per woman per year and a community order at £2,800. When compared with the estimated projected cost of holistic community-based services, which averages at £1,300 per woman, this is a substantial saving.

Investment delivers savings

By applying 'social return on investment' methodology, researchers found that for every £1 invested in support-focused alternatives to prison, £14 worth of social value is generated to women and their children, victims and society generally over ten years. Researchers concluded: 'There is a strong case for commissioners from criminal justice, health and

children's services to look at commissioning these services.'

Research by nef and the Prison Reform Trust also indicates that the potential for significant lifetime cost savings and crime reduction could be achieved from a network of centres to help women offenders address root causes of behaviour. Grant-holders estimated that they have been responsible for savings of £1.62m based on a reduced demand on health services, housing and reoffending as a result of preventative intervention. This includes cuttings costs incurred to the public purse, such as A&E admissions, use of mental health services, drug and alcohol treatment, arrests, court appearances, custodial sentences and housing eviction.

Every £1 invested in support-focused alternatives to prison generates £14 worth of social value over ten years.

With evidence suggesting that parental offending is one of the most important predictors of children's offending and of the effect parental alcohol and substance abuse can have on young people, timely intervention could ultimately save billions of pounds of public resources by improving the life-chances of future generations.



Families finding a way through the maze

The Maze project is carrying out innovative work with women experiencing domestic violence and their male partners, which is having preventative impacts on entire families.

The project, delivered by WomenCentre, comprises a small team of specialists including two male staff. An example of successful work undertaken with one family involved a couple who had been in a relationship for three years, which both wanted to continue.

A health worker referred the case because of concerns regarding the effect of domestic violence on the couple's children with additional concerns about unsuitable accommodation. The father had convictions for assault on the female, who was initially reluctant to acknowledge the seriousness of the violence. Nevertheless she did engage with Maze because staff offered to work with the children's father as well as supporting her. She was helped to recognise abusive and controlling

behaviours and devise strategies to protect herself and her children. She also received practical help to change her housing situation and was encouraged to engage with the social worker, midwife and wider family support services.

The male partner was initially reluctant to take part, but his experience of being listened to and recognising that the work was having a positive effect on his behaviour changed his attitude. He had very few qualifications as a result of a disrupted education and one-to-one work helped him understand the Integrated Domestic Abuse Programme and personalise the learning. When the man went to court, magistrates reported that progress through involvement in the project and the couple's adherence to Child Protection Plans contributed to sentencing to a Community Payback penalty, as opposed to a custodial sentence.

By the time work with Maze came to an end, Child Protection Plans were no longer in place and children's care services had ended their involvement with the family,

who were living together with the children in appropriate housing. School reported better behaviour from the eldest child. The health workers reported satisfaction at the parents' behaviour. There have been no further incidents reported of abusive behaviour by the man, who completed a training course to improve his prospects of finding paid work.

A small-scale evaluation by the University of Huddersfield found Maze innovative and highly successful in its tailored work with women deemed 'hard to reach' by other agencies. Researchers concluded: 'Of key importance to the Maze model of working is the central focus on the safety of women and children, and understanding, assessing and addressing the risks and responsibilities of the domestic violence behaviours. ...The Maze team's contribution to multi-agency child protection work was considered by some professionals to enhance the safeguarding of children.'

Innovation and overcoming barriers



Changing mindsets

A key component of women centred working is the ability to bring together diverse services to support positive life outcomes for women. This is not easy. It demands a continuous challenge to policy makers, funders and service providers to develop cross-agency links and co-operate to deliver better results for women with multiple needs.

There are many elements to developing a women centred approach, including aligning the goals, structures and funding sources for different agencies. The most important element is a change of mindset that puts women and girls at the heart of the discussion.

Our approach is to encourage policy makers, commissioners and providers of services across the UK

to think differently and to find new ways of addressing old problems.

Stopping the revolving door

A report for the Centre for Welfare Reform in 2011 found that a woman attempting to flee domestic violence could need to visit up to 15 different agencies before she gets the help she needs. A woman attempting to access crisis mental health services may not be accepted for referral if she has a learning disability, misuses alcohol or drugs, is living with domestic violence, or is homeless.

Women in these situations are often in a revolving door of services, none of which individually can begin to solve her multiple needs.

Work by WomenCentre and organisations like the Centre for Welfare Reform has shown that a woman centred, innovative

approach involves a mindset and vision that sets out to:

- Meet clearly established needs in the local area, identified through data and real women's experience.
- Identify and integrate funding from multiple sources.
- Support workers in different services to develop the skills and experience to work in a multi-agency way for the benefit of women and girls.
- Support women with robust and personalised support across a range of services.
- Develop powerful and long lasting partnerships between organisations and professional groups.
- Deliver efficient and effective outcomes for those women most in need.



Women's Community Matters in Cumbria

WomenCentre provided consultancy to Cumbria Probation Trust and local partners on a project to establish women specific services in Cumbria. Key partners offered their support to become the project steering group, including senior representatives from Probation, the Police, Barrow Borough Council, the Community Safety Partnership and the Clinical Commissioning Group. The steering group met bimonthly and projects were established within a year.

There was an initial needs assessment of women using local data followed by an inclusive consultation exercise, to which over 200 women contributed. Fifty women volunteered to help with the project and over 20 agencies participated in a multi-agency day to develop ideas on referrals.

The project was shaped by an awareness of the real needs of women in the area - high levels of domestic violence and alcohol use, low levels of aspiration and

poverty.

The consultant put together initial funding bids. The steering group became an advisory group and supported the interim manager and new trustees to develop the new centre, named and registered as a charity - Women's Community Matters.

The doors of the new centre opened in November 2013 and trained volunteers have supported the offer of activities and links to other key partner services.

So what worked?

- The Probation Trust understood the potential of a women centred approach to help address the needs of women offenders and reduce rates of reoffending, a model recommended in the Corston Report, 2007, which has resulted in over 50 similar centres working in this holistic way.
- Strong support and a shared vision within the Probation Trust allowed the consultant to develop the vision and

rationale and take this to other agencies for senior level approval.

- The local press came on board with support for the new idea at an early stage.
- The community-based approach ensured the accountability of the project.
- Cumbria Probation Trust supported a secondment arrangement with the local council to allow the Community Safety Coordinator to take up an additional role as part-time interim project manager.
- Barrow Borough Council offered an ideal town centre venue on a long term lease at a peppercorn rent.
- The new interim manager developed the project in a positive and enthusiastic way. She then brought together a group of committed experienced and credible trustees from the local community.

Taking forward women centred solutions

We have demonstrated the value of women centred working to improving outcomes for vulnerable women and their families – and ultimately to more effective use of budgets.

The Women Centred Working initiative aims to inspire policy-makers, commissioners, funders and service providers to do things in a way that works better for women and families facing multiple disadvantage. There are steps you can take right now that will help these women to move forward with their lives. Our recommendations for those in a position to influence policy and practice and improve service design and delivery include:

Central government

- Have a cross government Women's Plan.
- Identify women's champions across government departments.
- Develop policies that facilitate cost effective local, women centred solutions.
- Convene cross departmental and cross issue All Party Parliamentary Groups to focus the economic and social justice case for integrated approaches for women in relation to health, housing, drugs and alcohol, troubled families, domestic violence and diversion/ rehabilitation from the criminal justice system.

Commissioners

- Consider the needs of local women with complex needs for example by consulting with women themselves or specialist organisations and by undertaking strategic needs

assessment of this high need cohort.

- Work together with other commissioners to take an integrated approach to women and families with multiple disadvantage, for example by developing a women's strategy across commissioning bodies.
- Promote joint commissioning frameworks for women specific services.
- Ensure that payment by results (PBR) schemes and outcome measures are meaningful for women with complex needs and can capture multiple outcomes.



Funders

- Retain or develop a priority to fund programmes and projects that support women and girls with complex needs.
- Protect funding for women centred services.
- Support women centred working for both its effective outcomes for women, girls and families, as well as for its potential to unlock systems change at a national, regional and local level.

Service providers

Service providers working with both men and women, for example drugs services, homelessness services, mental health and domestic violence services can:

- Embrace the principles of women centred working.
- Initiate, lead or be involved in activities to promote better integration and outcomes for women and girls at risk for example local workshops and consultation exercises.
- Consider pooled funding arrangements for provision of services.
- Consider co-location of services to support holistic case work on one site and joint working between professionals.
- Ensure that women centred working is embedded through recruitment, training, supervision and policy.
- Develop a safe, empowering and trauma informed environment.

Local public leaders

- Invite women's specialists and women with lived experience to present the case for a different approach for women.
- Develop and champion a Strategy for Women and Girls with Vulnerabilities, involving women in its creation.
- Champion women centred working in initiatives such as community budgets and place-based working.
- Work with other public sector leaders to develop an integrated approach through co-commissioning of gender aware services.

What Women Centred Working can do for you

Women Centred Working has been established to share information on women centred approaches and assist in the design and delivery of more effective services for women with complex multiple needs.

Further on-line and printed resources will be available over coming months to help inspire women centred working on a wider scale. This will include a toolkit and targeted information.

We are also happy to talk to public sector leaders, policy-makers, statutory agencies, commissioners, funders, voluntary organisations and service providers about ways in which women centred solutions can help them respond to demands placed upon them.



Visit our website

www.womencentredworking.com

Reports referred to in this publication can be found on our website, along with further information about the women centred way of working.

Contact us

For further information or support in the development of Women Centred Working strategies and practice, please contact:

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'By helping women to make positive changes their lives, women's community services can help reduce demands on state services including police, courts and offender management, prisons and social services, primary and emergency healthcare and housing.... There is a strong case for commissioners from criminal justice, health and children's services to look at commissioning these services.'
New Economics Foundation researchers

'Clare Jones...was able to demonstrate the quality of their work and the robustness of the outcomes for the women who had engaged with their service. Really, really impressive and a very transferable model.'
Tom Burns, chief executive, The Ansel Group, which works with people with complex mental health needs

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