

Can a smarter approach help your authority respond to the challenge of individuals and families with multiple needs?

Women Centred Working* is an initiative to encourage the design and delivery of more effective services for women facing multiple disadvantage. Led by WomenCentre Calderdale and Kirklees** and funded by the Lankelly Chase Foundation, it aims to share good practice, change thinking and promote women centred approaches.

There is powerful evidence of the success of this approach from a variety of local projects. We now want to engage senior leaders in local government to test whether this can be applied more widely.



Why is this relevant to your authority?

The disproportionate costs associated with the severe and complex needs of vulnerable women and families are a major concern. To give one small example, the number of Looked After Children is at its highest for 30 years. 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.

The Troubled Families programme recognises this, but touches only a small proportion of

families. Women Centred Working goes further, by recognising women's multiple needs and also their potential as assets within their communities. Women of all ages have a unique role in developing social capital and ensuring that inter-generational cycles of deprivation, disadvantage and abuse are tackled. There are long-term benefits for individuals, children, families and communities, and cost savings for local public services.

The complex systems of support for women and families



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Do we have dysfunctional family situations circling round dysfunctional services?

This question has been posed by systems thinkers. It challenges current assumptions and invites new approaches and practical solutions such as those presented through women centred working.

Women facing multiple disadvantages often lead chaotic and complex lives. 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 of children.

To get support, they have to access complex and fragmented services delivered by different organisations across different locations. Some of these services work well. Some don't. It's a system that professionals struggle to understand, let alone a vulnerable woman in crisis who may have to visit up to 15 agencies to get the support she needs. It's a revolving, and expensive, series of doors.

Evidence of a better approach

There is a growing body of evidence of the value of gendered approaches, such as:

- Integrating domestic violence support, benefits advice, counselling and skills development in a 'women centred one-stop-shop' brought substantial improvements in mental health for 80% of service users in West Yorkshire, a study showed.
- New Economics Foundation research found grant-holders identified estimated savings of £1.62m based on reduced demands on services, including housing and social services, as a result of community-based intervention for low risk female offenders.
- The Way Forward, a multi-agency pilot project delivered at WomenCentre Calderdale involving 165 disadvantaged young women achieved improvements in relationships, educational involvement and avoidance of unsafe sex, substance misuse and other risk-taking behaviour. Many of the young women involved have gone on to jobs, university courses and healthy, independent

lives. Evaluation by Leeds Beckett University shows the role of engagement staff – who work alongside vulnerable young women to prevent family, mental health and other issues spiralling out of control – is a cost effective option compared with, for example, £59 per hour for qualified social worker time.

- Nelson Trust in Gloucestershire has delivered positive results based on a 'trauma-informed' ethos, which recognises the abuse many service users have suffered during their lives. Women whose children were in care now have them back with them as a result of successful interventions. This means savings to the public purse as well as preventing further trauma and inter-generational disadvantage.

Is this just about women?

The Women Centred Working initiative is focused on women and girls. But men can and do benefit from gendered approaches. Boys are also affected by exposure to abuse within families and often lack role models to help them to enjoy healthy and respectful relationships with women and girls. Projects also exist to respond to the needs of men and boys in a gendered way. One example is A Band of Brothers*, which works in partnership with councils, health and other services and communities to work together with men to develop meaningful alternatives to self-destructive and anti-social behavior.

An idea whose time has come

Vulnerable women have been supported by a network of women's centres and local projects for decades. These projects have worked across agencies, sharing ideas, methods and budgets and always putting the clients, in this case vulnerable women, at the centre, which benefits whole families with complex needs.

The success of this approach chimes with much current thinking and how modern public services need to operate in future:

- Avoiding service duplication and the revolving door syndrome
- Maximising efficiency
- Devolved and pooled budgets
- Achieving multiple positive outcomes
- Co-production - tapping into the potential of individuals and local communities to solve their own problems
- Personalisation of budgets and services
- Prevention rather than crisis intervention.

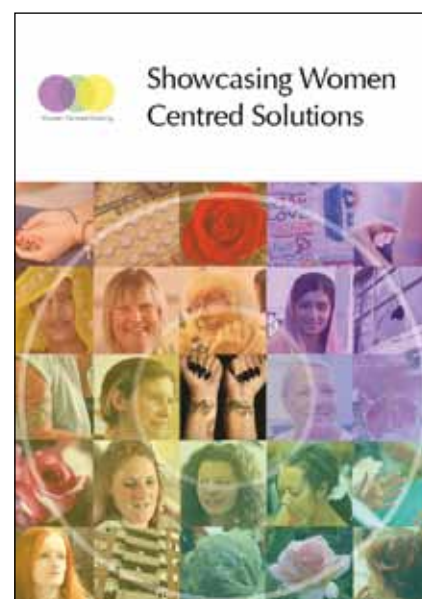
*www.abandofbrothers.org.uk

Oldham: an authority-wide approach to women centred working

The emerging partnership between Oldham Council and Early Help Consortia partners, The Collective/Inspire Women Oldham, offers an example of how gendered thinking has potential to benefit whole communities of the future. A key element is the understanding that co-production only ever really occurs in the critical middle ground. This is a space where the user of the service and professional knowledge is combined to design and deliver services, going beyond traditional models of consultation.

The implementation of the Early Help model by the council created a space from which local women could begin to take on roles as shapers and leaders of their own services, redefining power, intervention and support and seeing leadership as anyone who was willing to help. Women are invited to self organise around the issues they care most about. It moves away from the categories of victims and helpers and instead starts from a place of equality and human connection.

Empathy, understanding, respect and honesty are important. Trust is the most vital ingredient – trust that women are equipped, informed and able to be of value in supporting positive change in themselves and their community. This approach gives the council opportunities to tap into women's capacity, build a knowledge base, ask critical questions and co-produce services that make a long term difference.



The principles of women centred working are outlined in our booklet, along with examples.

Can a gendered approach tackle problems that gender neutral services can't?

We think that it can. There is powerful evidence to suggest that women centred ways of thinking and working can deliver more sustainable outcomes by getting to the root of deep-seated, interwoven problems such as domestic violence, offending behaviour, physical and mental illness, substance misuse, poverty and homelessness.

What's the experience in your authority?

How are you tackling this issue?

Is this an approach currently being used in your authority? If so, please let us know and give us a contact point so that we can learn from and share your experience with our networks.

If not, could we contribute to discussions you are having about service transformation, devolved powers and budgets and community based approaches?

Would you like to:

- Join our new local authority network to support and promote women centred ways of thinking and working?
- Receive a copy of our report *Showcasing Women Centred Solutions* which outlines the principals of Women Centred Working?
- Receive a copy of our next report *Taking Forward Women Centred Solutions*?
- Meet with someone from our project to find out how it could benefit your thinking on new solutions?
- Come to the launch of our new report?

If so, please get in touch with:

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