

Understanding how women's centres work

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What are women's centres?

Women's centres are specialist community-based support services for women experiencing multiple disadvantage and inequality. They are demonstrably the most effective way to support women to extract themselves from harmful situations and cycles of offending and prevent themselves from being drawn into the criminal justice system itself.

Women's centres are run for women, by women, in **women-only spaces**. They offer **gender-responsive services** delivered with a **trauma-informed approach** that recognises how trauma and abuse impact women's lives, and the lives of their families, and why addressing the psychological impact of this trauma is vital to meeting women's needs.



The **holistic services** provided by women's centres encompass all aspects of a woman's life and aim to deliver support in relation to a range of issues including housing, finances, physical and mental health, domestic abuse, substance misuse, training and education, rights and criminal justice issues.

Services are usually delivered from one place, in collaboration and partnership with other agencies, by specially trained staff. This helps to keep women connected to their communities, families and support networks while accessing the wider support they need.

Key workers or case workers offer bespoke, intensive one-to-one support to women in accessible and non-judgemental ways. This approach is key to empowering women to break free from cycles of trauma and criminalisation and equip them with the tools they need to heal, to prosper and to thrive.

Why do women's centres work?

Women's centres **provide women only spaces** and a **gender and trauma informed approach** to support. Women's needs are different from men's, and women's centres recognise this. Services that are not gender-specific can be damaging to some women and women's centres provide women-only spaces to help women feel safe and comfortable.

Women's centres adopt a gendered and trauma-informed approach which acknowledges the wider socio-political influences in women's lives. This approach recognises that trauma or abuse significantly impacts many women and that their wider experiences of racism, poverty, imprisonment, child loss and involvement with other systems like the social care and immigration systems can further contribute to their trauma.

The practical and emotional support offered by women's centres is highly valued by women and women respond well to being supported in the safe, non-judgemental, and welcoming environments that women's centres strive to create.

Holistic, tailored and multi-agency support

Holistic approaches view each woman as a whole person and tailor provision to her individual needs and life experiences, rather than just in relation to a particular issue such as her mental health difficulties or her responsibilities as a parent.

Holistic programmes are either delivered by specialist staff or via multi-agency partnerships. These partnerships are built on recognising the advantages of coordination and collaboration across services and systems.

Strengths-based services developed in collaboration with women

Women's centres aim to offer **strengths-based support**, seeking to empower women by building on their capabilities and strengths, and by encouraging self-belief and confidence that help women to make positive decisions and changes in their lives.

Women's needs are better met when they are involved in creating solutions as equal and reciprocal partners. This is a driving principle in the women's centre approach.

The specialist role of key workers

Women's centres train their staff and **keyworkers** to take a **non-judgemental** and respectful approach rooted in a fundamental equality between themselves and the women accessing their services. Key workers engage with and provide intensive **one-to-one support** to women across a range of areas and provide high quality **trauma informed and women-centred support** by building positive and trusted relationships with women.

What women tell us

“Women’s centre workers relate to you and fill the gaps that statutory services don’t have time to fill.”

“It’s valuable to get one to one support from a women’s service. It helps to build trust and know that you’re working with someone who has got your back!”

“Having a keyworker gives you one person to build a rapport with and helps you to be the real you.”

“Women’s centres are non-judgemental places where you can feel safe. They can also help to point you in the direction of other opportunities, connect you with your community and make it easier to build relationships with other agencies and individuals.”

“I felt part of a bigger team and found networking easier. I did not have to repeat anything about my lived experience. Having a key worker, I felt a longer continuity of service... they have allowed me to be supported for much longer.”

Links to further reading

[The Value of Women’s Centres](#) - Women in Prison (2022)

[Why Women's Centres Work report](#) - Tavistock Institute (2019)

[The Case for Sustainable Funding for Women’s Centres](#) - UK Women’s Budget Group (2020)