

Women's Centres

An essential part of the government's early intervention infrastructure



**National Women's
Justice Coalition**

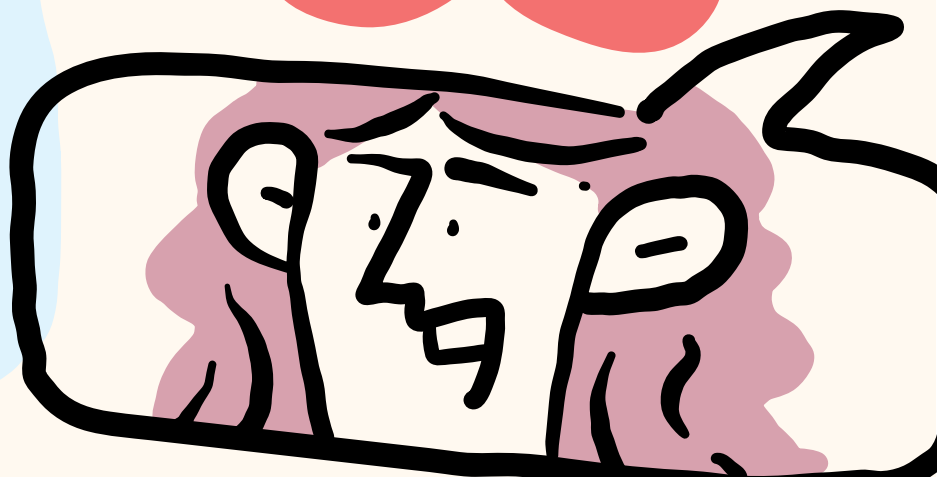




Image credit: Together Women's Centre, Leeds

Executive summary

The government's agenda for children and families is increasingly focused on intervening earlier, providing holistic support, and tackling the factors that can cause problems to escalate, and ultimately preventing crisis. Alongside this, there has been a welcome ambition to halve violence against women and girls in a decade, and to strengthen the support available to women and girls at risk of harm.

To achieve these ambitions, local services have to identify need early, build trusted relationships with young people and families, and provide tailored, coordinated support. In many communities, Women's Centres already perform this role. They provide holistic support in safe, women-only environments, often engaging those who face barriers to accessing statutory services. Evidence demonstrates that Women's Centres improve outcomes for women, children and families, while generating savings for public services. Yet these vital community resources are poorly funded, and few and far between.

As the government develops Family Hubs, Young Futures Hubs, Families First reforms and neighbourhood-based services, Women's Centres should be recognised as a core component of local early intervention systems, helping women and girls access the tailored support they need to overcome challenges, build resilience and thrive.

This briefing sets out how the government can make this a reality, by:

1. Recognising Women's Centres as an essential part of the local early intervention infrastructure
2. Using devolution to strengthen local early intervention for women and girls, by establishing a clear expectation that mayors and strategic authorities play a leading role in improving outcomes for women and girls through coordinated place-based partnerships
3. Developing a cross-departmental strategy for girls and young women, recognising Women's Centres as a core delivery mechanism
4. Establishing a cross-government funding and accountability framework to ensure Women's Centres are embedded within wider strategies for prevention, family support and reducing inequalities, rather than being viewed solely through a criminal justice lens
5. Investing in a sustainable national network of Women's Centres
6. Improving support for care-experienced girls and young women

What is a Women's Centre?

Women's Centres are community-based, trauma-informed services that provide holistic support for women and girls. Importantly, this support happens in safe, women-only environments, which are more accessible for women and girls who have experienced abuse and violence, or who might otherwise not engage with support services more generally.

Rather than focusing on a single issue, Women's Centres help women address multiple challenges at once, including:

- Contact or risk of contact with the criminal justice system
- Substance use
- Domestic abuse and violence against women and girls
- Mental health and wellbeing
- Financial insecurity and debt
- Housing and homelessness
- Parenting and family relationships

Women's Centres act as trusted local hubs, helping women access specialist support, build confidence and improve outcomes for themselves and their families. By bringing together holistic, trauma-informed support and helping women navigate other services, they can play a vital role in enabling women to leave harmful situations, address the underlying causes of disadvantage and break cycles of harm.



Introduction

Girls and young women are growing up with a range of gender-specific challenges. These include gender-based violence, exploitation and misogyny, harmful stereotypes and unequal expectations around caring and emotional labour. As young women move into adulthood, many continue to face gendered inequalities. Mothers, in particular, continue to shoulder the majority of caring responsibilities, and are more likely to experience mental health difficulties, domestic abuse, financial insecurity and barriers to employment. These pressures can have significant consequences for families and children.

An effective early intervention system needs to recognise and respond to these realities. Gender shapes people's experiences, risks and opportunities, influencing both the challenges they face and the support they need. If we fail to understand gendered needs, we risk missing opportunities to improve outcomes for children and families and allowing inequalities to become entrenched from an early age.

Women's Centres are a proven solution to these challenges. They provide holistic, community-based support to girls, young women and mothers with complex needs, often reaching those who face significant barriers to engaging with statutory services. Through early intervention and trusted relationships, Women's Centres address challenges before they escalate – improving outcomes, preventing involvement in the criminal justice system, and reducing demand for more costly crisis responses further down the line.

The government has set out its ambition to ensure that all children get the best start in life and have the chance to achieve and thrive. Key to this vision is a shift in public services towards early intervention and multi-agency collaboration. Achieving this will require stronger local infrastructure that can identify need early, build trusted relationships with young people and families, and provide holistic support that cuts across traditional service boundaries. Women's Centres must be recognised as a key part of that infrastructure.

The government's devolution agenda creates a significant opportunity to look at strengthening the role of Women's Centres within local prevention and early intervention systems. As the government develops Family Hubs, Young Futures Hubs, Families First Partnerships and neighbourhood-based services, Women's Centres should be recognised as a core component of local early intervention systems for children, young people and their families.

Why girls, young women and mothers are more likely to need targeted support

Many girls and women have the resources and support networks needed to lead safe, healthy and fulfilling lives. But millions of others are growing up in poverty and insecure housing, with poor mental health and other unmet needs which are limiting their futures.

These challenges are often shaped by wider gender inequalities. Women are 50% more likely than men to be in low-paid work, and almost one in five jobs held by women are paid below the real Living Wage.¹ Polling of low-paid women found that 69% reported a negative impact on their mental health, while a third said their relationship with their child had been negatively affected.²

Girls and women with multiple unmet needs may experience a combination of homelessness, unsupported early parenthood, substance use, poor mental health, abuse, and contact with the criminal justice system.³ Child in Need assessments show that episodes involving parental drug dependency have increased by 16.6% since 2018, while domestic abuse remains one of the most commonly recorded factors, identified in more than 162,000 assessments in 2024/25.⁴

Girls and young women face distinct risks and vulnerabilities. Although mental health challenges among young people are increasing across both girls and boys, the nature of those challenges and the factors driving them often differ. Over a quarter of young women aged 16–24 are reported to have experienced symptoms of depression or anxiety, approximately triple the rate of young men.⁵ Girls and young women face particular risks associated with domestic abuse and sexual violence.⁶ Research from the University of Birmingham's Women, Crime and Justice Research Group shows that experience of violence and abuse is a clear driver of women's contact with the justice system, with more than 80% of women in the criminal justice system having experienced physical or sexual abuse.⁷ Other factors linked to poor mental health among girls and young women include gendered social pressures and sexism, online harms, intersectional oppression and pressures associated with young motherhood.⁸

¹ Living Wage Foundation (2025) Nearly 3 million women paid below real Living Wage as gender pay gap widens

² Ibid

³ Agenda Alliance (2022) Pushed Out Left Out. Girls Speak: Final Report

⁴ Centre for Young Lives (2026) State of the Nation: Identifying Vulnerable Children and Young People and Supporting Them to Thrive

⁵ NHS England (2023) Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023 – wave 4 follow up to the 2017 survey

⁶ Agenda Alliance (2022) Pushed Out Left Out. Girls Speak: Final Report

⁷ Summers et al (2024) Exploring Needs Profiles in Criminal Justice-Involved Women

⁸ Centre for Young Lives & Agenda Alliance (2026) Meeting the needs of young women and girls in the implementation and delivery of Young Futures Hubs

These trends highlight the importance of support that recognises girls' and women's distinct lived experiences and provides safe, trusted environments where experiences of abuse can be disclosed. Statutory services, however, are typically organised around individual issues and eligibility thresholds. Many women fall through gaps in service provision, fail to meet thresholds for intervention, or are required to navigate multiple agencies at once, repeatedly retelling painful experiences without receiving coordinated support.⁹

For some girls, women and children, the consequences can be significant, leading to family breakdown, contact with acute services, long term disengagement from education or employment, and children entering care. Recent trends suggest these risks are increasing:

- The number of girls who are severely absent from school has risen by 257% since 2017.¹⁰
- Between 2017/18 and 2024/25, the rate of girls excluded from school increased by over 60%.¹¹
- The number of young women not in education, employment or training is now at its highest level since 2014.¹²
- In 2023, over a quarter of young women aged 16–24 were reported to experience symptoms of depression or anxiety.¹³

By identifying risks earlier and providing coordinated, trauma-informed support, specialist, gender-specific services can improve outcomes, while reducing demand on services including the NHS for more intensive and expensive crisis interventions later on.

If the government's early intervention agenda for children and families is to succeed, it will require organisations that can engage girls and women early, build trusted relationships with them and address multiple needs simultaneously. Women's Centres are already performing this role in many communities. There is now an opportunity to ensure they are much better connected into local early intervention systems, helping deliver on a range of government aims.

⁹ Agenda Alliance (2022) Pushed Out Left Out. Girls Speak: Final Report

¹⁰ Agenda Alliance (2025) New analysis shows alarming 257% increase in girls severely absent from school

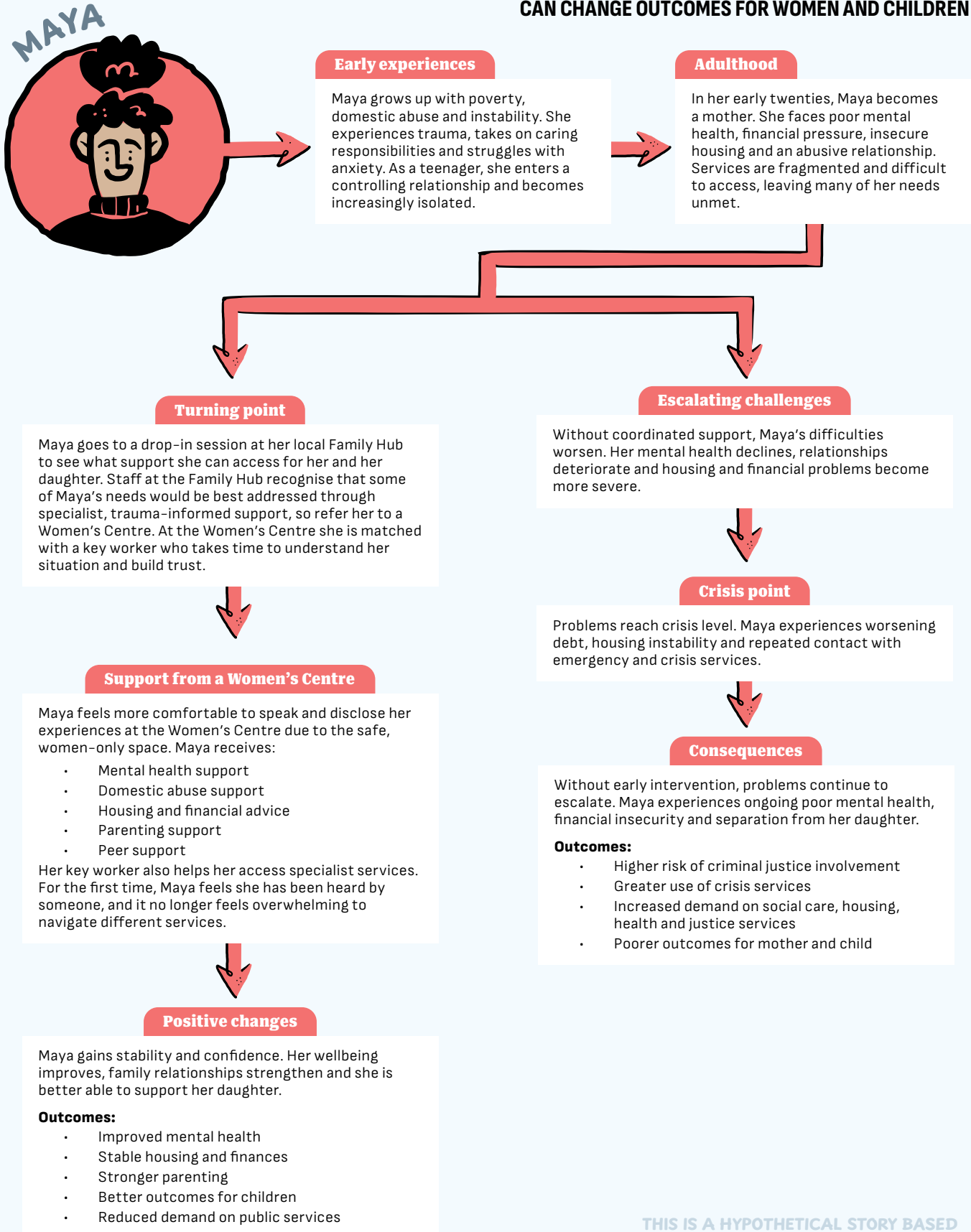
¹¹ Agenda Alliance (2026) High rates of exclusions show girls in the North East are being left behind

¹² Young Women's Trust (2026) Young Women's Trust respond to the interim Milburn report on NEET young people

¹³ NHS England (2023) Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023 – wave 4 follow up to the 2017 survey

The benefits of Women's Centres

HOW EARLY INTERVENTION THROUGH WOMEN'S CENTRES CAN CHANGE OUTCOMES FOR WOMEN AND CHILDREN



At their heart, Women's Centres exist to offer a safe, trusted space where women receive relational, person centred and holistic support.¹⁴ Rather than focusing on a single issue, staff who are specialists in understanding and supporting the distinct needs of women work with them to understand the full range of challenges affecting their lives. Support typically involves a combination of dedicated centre-based services, one-to-one keywork, group work, and access to specialist services through multi-agency partnerships.

The economic value of Women's Centres

Analysis has estimated that a Women's Centre receiving £1 million annually can support more than 650 women per year and generate around £2.75 million in wider socio-economic benefits, including savings for public services and welfare gains for women and their children.¹⁵ Benefits are spread across multiple public sector agencies, including local authorities, the Ministry of Justice, and the NHS.¹⁶

The Women's Services Map, launched in 2023 by the National Women's Justice Coalition, lists 120 Women's Centres and specialist hubs across the UK.¹⁷ However, provision is not geographically consistent, and where services do exist, the level of provision does not always meet local demand.¹⁸ Funding arrangements mean that existing networks of Women's Centres may not be able to reach their full potential, with many contracts limiting centres to working with specific cohorts of women, such as women who are already in contact with the criminal justice system.¹⁹

Women's Centres already have a distinctive role in the ecosystem of support for children and families. As they work with women who are often mothers, many of whom are the primary carers for dependent children, the outcomes they achieve for women have direct beneficial effects on children. Support with domestic abuse, mental health, housing, finances and substance use all contribute to safer, more stable home environments for children to grow up in. Women's Centres explicitly advocate for mothers in statutory meetings, support women to facilitate contact with children, and help build positive relationships and parenting capacity.²⁰ They bring unique experience and expertise that is under-utilised in many local areas, but could be of great value to the government's early intervention aims.

As well as provision for adult women, some Women's Centres offer specialist services for girls and young women under 25. This includes supporting those who are at risk of, or experiencing, domestic abuse, exploitation, sexual violence, harm through the criminal justice system or other forms of gender-based harm. For example, Anawim, a Women's Centre in Birmingham, offers tailored support for young girls and women who find themselves in early abusive

¹⁴ Howard League for Penal Reform (2016) Is this the end of women's centres?

¹⁵ Women in Prison (2022) The value of Women's Centres

¹⁶ Women in Prison (2022) The value of Women's Centres

¹⁷ Stats as of Aug 2026 – National Women's Justice Coalition

¹⁸ Ministry of Justice (2019) The Importance of Strengthening Female Offenders' Family and other Relationships to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime

¹⁹ Women in Prison (2022) The value of Women's Centres

²⁰ Women in Prison (2022) The value of Women's Centres

relationships and subject to image-based abuse, online trolling, misogynistic attitudes and coercive control, which can result in body dysmorphia, anorexia, anxiety, depression and self-harm.

While specific provision for girls is not a consistent feature of provision across all Women's Centres, there is an opportunity to build on existing practice and support more Women's Centres to expand their offer to reach girls and young women in a gender-specific, trauma informed way. This could include strengthening links with schools, Young Futures Hubs and other early intervention services so that girls can access specialist support before needs escalate.

Women's Centres are particularly effective at engaging girls and women who face barriers to accessing statutory services. Shame and stigma associated with multiple needs, fear of losing children, distrust of statutory agencies, and prior negative experiences of service contact can all create significant barriers for the most vulnerable girls and women. The non-stigmatising, women-only environment of Women's Centres, combined with their independence from statutory enforcement bodies, helps to lower these barriers sufficiently for girls and women to make first contact.

There is scope to build on Women's Centres provision to ensure more women who face barriers to services can access compassionate and tailored support, including:

1. Black and minoritised girls and women who frequently face racism, cultural barriers or stereotyping in statutory systems.
2. Migrant women, including those with insecure immigration status, who may fear or distrust statutory agencies or be unsure how to navigate them.
3. Young women with complex trauma who often fall between children's and adults' services and benefit from gender specific, flexible support.
4. Mothers experiencing domestic abuse, who may not be believed or may be blamed within statutory child protection processes.
5. Women who have had children removed through care proceedings, who often avoid statutory services due to shame, fear, distrust or previous harm.

Women's Centres are also well placed to address several persistent gaps in provision because they provide safe, trusted community-based spaces where girls and women can build relationships with adults and disclose needs that might otherwise be missed. These gaps include:

- Support following child removal. Statutory services rarely provide sustained therapeutic or practical support after child removal, despite the high risk of repeat removals, homelessness, mental health crises, and criminalisation. Women's Centres can offer trusted, long-term support.
- Trauma-informed support for girls and young women affected by abuse, violence or exploitation, including domestic abuse support for young mothers.
- Services for young women transitioning into adulthood. This group often falls between children and adult services, especially those with care histories, experiences of exploitation or trauma.

- Holistic support addressing the drivers of female offending, which integrates mental health, housing, parenting, trauma, substance use and safety planning in one place.
- Community-based alternatives to custody and homelessness.

A substantial body of evidence demonstrates positive outcomes from Women's Centre provision. Research has found that Women's Centres can reduce reoffending rates by as much as 42%,²¹ while improving engagement with health, housing and support services. Evidence suggests that Women's Centres increase self-efficacy and resilience, which in turn contributes to improvements in mental health, substance misuse recovery and trauma recovery.²²

Analysis of the benefits generated by Women's Centres has also found that engagement with Women's Centres reduces the likelihood of children being placed in care.²³

²¹ Summers, R., Pemberton, S. & Long, J. (2025) Examining the effectiveness of interventions for criminal justice-involved women: a meta-analytic review.

²² Summers, R. et al (2024) Examining the relationship between severity & complexity of needs among women involved in the criminal justice system



How Women's Centres have operated within local systems

Women's Centres have long been recognised as an essential part of the criminal justice landscape, yet their wider benefit and place within the early intervention ecosystem is yet to be fully realised.

The 2007 Corston Report, which called for a radical rethinking of how women are treated across the criminal justice system, identified Women's Centres as key delivery vehicles for community-based support and alternatives to custody.²⁴ In 2018, the Female Offender Strategy reaffirmed the importance of Women's Centres and their role in reducing offending, supporting families and delivering better outcomes than imprisonment.²⁵

The 2019 Farmer Review identified Women's Centres as effective mechanisms for strengthening family relationships and recommended stronger integration with wider family support infrastructure.²⁶ Most recently, the Women's Justice Board's 2026 recommendations called for increased investment in specialist women's services and for local partnership plans to better connect early intervention agendas with young women's services, maximising the impact of other government investments in early intervention and community health.²⁷

The growing recognition that Women's Centres contribute to a range of outcomes beyond the criminal justice system reflects the reality that they rarely operate in isolation. Many are deeply embedded within local communities and work closely with local authorities, schools, social care teams, health providers, domestic abuse services, housing providers, probation services and police forces. In places where there are strong partnerships, this enables effective referrals, coordinated support and more seamless pathways between services, reducing barriers for women who may otherwise face difficulties engaging with support. In many areas, Women's Centres already form part of local strategies to reduce reoffending, tackle violence against women and girls and respond to domestic abuse.

Despite extensive local activity, Women's Centres are not consistently recognised or valued as core partners within systems. As a result, referral pathways are often inconsistent, access varies substantially between areas, Women's Centres are frequently excluded from strategic planning processes, opportunities for service co-location and integrated support are missed and outcomes for girls and women depend heavily on local relationships rather than national policy.

The funding landscape reflects and compounds these challenges. Women's Centres often rely on a patchwork of funding,²⁸ which can include twenty or more short-term, project-

²³ Women in Prison (2022) The value of Women's Centres

²⁴ Home Office (2007) The Corston Report: The need for a distinct, radically different, visibly-led strategic, proportionate, holistic, woman-centred, integrated approach

²⁵ Ministry of Justice (2018) Female Offender Strategy

²⁶ Ministry of Justice (2019) The Importance of Strengthening Female Offenders' Family and other Relationships to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime

²⁷ Ministry of Justice (2026) Women's Justice Board recommendations for reducing women's imprisonment

²⁸ Women's Centres may receive funding from a range of sources, including the Ministry of Justice, Police and Crime Commissioners, NHS bodies, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, local authorities, and charitable funders.

based funding streams.²⁹ This can make it difficult for centres to invest in capacity or sustain services in the long term. Reviews by successive governments and independent bodies have repeatedly highlighted the absence of sustainable funding models. A 2025 survey of 26 women's organisations³⁰ found that 77% had not secured sufficient funding to cover their forecast expenditure, and less than 8% reported that statutory funding covered the full cost of service delivery most of the time.³¹

Recent investment demonstrates growing recognition of the value of community-based support for women. In March 2026, the government announced the £31.6 million Women's Diversion Fund, representing a 50% uplift in funding to women's voluntary and community sector organisations, to help divert women who are already in contact with the criminal justice system.³²

However, there is significant scope to explore the role of Women's Centres in the wider early intervention ecosystem to address needs before they escalate and lead to crises.

Opportunities to strengthen the role of Women's Centres within wider early intervention infrastructure

A number of current reforms and strategies share a key focus on strong partnerships, early intervention, and local collaboration, and Women's Centres could support their delivery. These include:

- The Department for Education's schools' reforms. The Government has recognised that too many children are not receiving support early enough and that the current system is often fragmented, adversarial and unsustainable. The White Paper sets out the Government's ambition to place inclusion at the heart of the education system through earlier intervention, stronger mainstream inclusion and improved local partnership working.
- The Ministry of Justice's Youth Justice White Paper, which recognises the distinct needs of girls and commits to deepening understanding and strengthening support.
- The National Youth Strategy, led by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, which recognises the importance of rebuilding the local infrastructure of youth provision, including through Young Futures Hubs, and recognises some of the unique challenges girls and young women face, such as being more likely to feel unsafe in their local area, or exposure to online harms such as cyberflashing and unsolicited sexual images.
- The Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategy, which includes:
 - ◇ A credible offer in every secondary school in England by 2029 for educating young people about healthy and respectful relationships.
 - ◇ Funding to improve child and family social workers' capacity and skills to identify and intervene earlier on VAWG, provide wrap-around family support, and to break the cycle of intergenerational abuse.

²⁹ Women in Prison (2022) The value of Women's Centres

³⁰ Women's Budget Group & National Women's Justice Coalition (2025) The Women's Centre Model – the Financial Case for Alternatives to Prison

³¹ Women's Budget Group & National Women's Justice Coalition (2025) The Women's Centre Model – the Financial Case for Alternatives to Prison

³² Ministry of Justice (2026) Women in the criminal justice system: policy statement

The government's devolution agenda creates a significant opportunity to bring these strands together at a local level, with Women's Centres as key partners in supporting women and girls.

Strategic authorities, mayors and local partnerships are increasingly responsible for coordinating activity across public services, including health, employment, skills, housing, community safety and family support. Women's Centres are well positioned to support this agenda due to the way in which they operate at neighbourhood level, while addressing challenges that cut across statutory service boundaries. Their ability to engage girls and women who are least likely to access statutory services makes them valuable partners for devolved systems seeking to reduce inequalities and manage demand across public services.

As devolution expands, Women's Centres should be recognised and valued as key local delivery partners within integrated place-based strategies. Some local areas, including London, Manchester, and the West Midlands have already developed this approach, integrating service delivery between different stakeholders and pooling resources from across areas to ensure women have access to services when they need them.³³

How local partnerships are delivering results for women

After embedding a Whole Systems Approach³⁴, which brings together NHS trusts, councils, adult social care, police and crime commissioners, probation and charities, Greater Manchester saw a 60% reduction between 2014 and 2019 in the use of immediate prison sentences under six months for women.³⁵

In the West Midlands, the New Chance Project was set up to address the pattern of repeat offending committed by vulnerable women. Funded by the Police and Crime Commissioner, access to the project is facilitated by the West Midlands Police, who make referrals into programmes of tailored support delivered by local Women's Centres. An evaluation conducted by the University of Birmingham in 2020 found that New Chance successfully reduced reoffending by 16%.³⁶ For participants with substance misuse issues, this rose to 50%.³⁷

The experience of these areas suggests that effective place-based provision depends on strong partnership working, coordination across public services and sustainable funding. However, this approach is not yet consistently available across the country. The government should use devolution to support the wider adoption of this model and enable local areas to build partnerships around support.

Combined authorities and strategic authorities should be encouraged to involve Women's Centres in initiatives relating to family support, violence against women and girls, community safety, economic inactivity, health inequalities and neighbourhood-based prevention.

³³ Women in Prison (2022) The value of Women's Centres

³⁴ Women in Prison (2022) The value of Women's Centres

³⁵ Prison Reform Trust (2020) Number of women sentenced to immediate custody for less than 6 months in England and Wales by Police Force Area, 2014–2019

³⁶ Abramovaite, J. et al (2020) New Chance; Process and Impact Evaluation. University of Birmingham, Centre for Crime, Justice and Policing

³⁷ Ibid

To support more effective integration, the government should establish a stronger expectation that strategic authorities, local authorities, Family Hubs, Young Futures Hubs, health partners and community-based specialist services collaborate in the design and delivery of early intervention services. As part of this, the government should explore mechanisms to strengthen local partnership working, including a 'duty to collaborate' on early intervention. Local systems should move beyond high-level principles towards shared operational planning, with a focus on co-location, joint commissioning, common outcomes and clear referral pathways. This would help ensure girls, young women and mothers with multiple needs receive joined-up, person-centred support, improving the ability of local services to identify needs early and respond more effectively.

Metro Mayors are in a particularly unique position to support the implementation of this framework, holding key leadership responsibilities alongside commissioning and convening powers, with close proximity to their communities. Having the 'duty to collaborate' mostly at Combined Authority level also has the potential to create a stronger link between the devolution agenda (including devolved funding, common outcome frameworks, local service integration) and the government's early intervention ambitions.

Supporting the government's key reforms

Family Hubs and Families First

While Family Hubs provide a valuable universal offer, Women's Centres are well placed to engage mothers who face domestic abuse, criminal justice involvement, trauma, substance use or child protection concerns. Integrating Women's Centres into local family support pathways would ensure families with the most complex needs receive specialist support while remaining connected to universal provision. Formal partnerships and referral pathways should be established between Women's Centres, Family Hubs and Families First services to create joined-up support for parents and children.

Young Futures Hubs

As Young Futures Hubs are developed, there is a significant opportunity to build upon the expertise already present within Women's Centres to support girls and young women. Many centres already work with girls and young women affected by trauma, exploitation, violence, poor mental health and family instability. Existing Women's Centre infrastructure could be incorporated into local Young Futures delivery models wherever possible.

Local authorities could encourage consortia applications for hubs provision which may include partnerships with Women's Centres to deliver engagement and outreach with girls. Young Futures Hubs may also consider commissioning specialist training for their staff from Women's Centres, providing co-location and partnership delivery opportunities, and establishing clear plans for outreach and referral pathways.

Youth justice, probation and criminal justice services

Women's Centres should play a greater role as trusted community locations for probation appointments, diversion programmes and early support. This would reduce duplication, improve engagement and limit the need for women and girls to repeatedly disclose traumatic experiences across multiple agencies.

Health, mental health and schools

Women's Centres provide opportunities for co-located services, including mental health support, domestic abuse specialists, school-based interventions and community health provision. Greater integration can improve identification of need while reducing pressure on statutory services.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Recognise Women's Centres as essential early intervention infrastructure

Girls, young women and mothers with complex needs often fall through gaps in statutory provision, as services are typically organised around single issues and high eligibility thresholds rather than the interconnected realities of people's lives. Women's Centres already provide trusted, holistic support that addresses multiple needs early, yet they are not consistently recognised or valued within local early intervention and prevention systems.

The government should formally recognise Women's Centres as a core component of local early intervention systems, alongside Family Hubs, Young Futures Hubs and wider neighbourhood services. Guidance for Early Help services, Best Start in Life Family Hubs and Families First should explicitly recognise Women's Centres as trusted delivery partners.

The government should also establish a clear expectation, potentially through 'a duty to collaborate on early intervention', that local authorities, strategic authorities, Family Hubs, Young Futures Hubs and specialist community organisations work together to design and deliver joined-up support. Local areas should establish formal referral pathways, joint operational plans, partnership arrangements and opportunities for co-location to ensure women and families can access coordinated, holistic support.

Recommendation 2

Use devolution to strengthen early intervention for women and girls

As powers and responsibilities are increasingly devolved, there is a risk that the needs of women and girls may not be consistently reflected in local priorities, investment decisions and service design across the country. At the same time, devolution creates a significant opportunity to build stronger partnerships between statutory services and community-based organisations that are often best placed to engage women and girls early.

The government should establish a clear expectation within devolution settlements that mayors and strategic authorities play a leading role in improving outcomes for women and girls through early intervention. Strategic authorities should be encouraged to convene and coordinate local early intervention partnerships involving Women's Centres, Family Hubs, Young Futures Hubs, health services, schools, social care and community safety partners. These partnerships should develop shared operational plans, support co-location and joint commissioning where appropriate, and create clear referral pathways for women and families with multiple needs.

Recommendation 3

Develop a cross-departmental strategy for girls and young women, recognising Women's Centres as a core delivery mechanism for reaching vulnerable girls and young women

Girls and young women often experience interconnected challenges across education, safety, health and wellbeing, but government policy remains fragmented and lacks a coherent framework for preventing problems from escalating into later disadvantage or criminal justice involvement.

The government should develop a comprehensive strategy covering early years through to the transition into adulthood that addresses education, safety, health, justice and violence against women and girls.

This strategy should recognise the links between gender-based violence, trauma, unmet need and later contact with the criminal justice system, while ensuring that gender-responsive early intervention is embedded across public services. Women's Centres should be recognised as key delivery partners, given their proven ability to engage girls and young women early, build trusted relationships and provide holistic support across multiple areas of need.

Recommendation 4

Establish cross-government funding and accountability

Women's Centres generate benefits across justice, education, health, housing and safeguarding, yet responsibility for commissioning and funding remains fragmented and falls disproportionately on the Ministry of Justice.

The government should establish a formal cross-departmental funding and accountability framework involving the Ministry of Justice, Department for Education, Department of Health and Social Care, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Home Office. This could include:

- A joint ministerial group overseeing women's early intervention and prevention services.
- Shared outcomes relating to family stability, violence prevention, health and reduced criminal justice involvement.
- Pooled or aligned funding arrangements where appropriate.
- Expectations within devolution settlements that strategic authorities coordinate investment in Women's Centres and other specialist community services.
- Annual reporting on the availability and sustainability of Women's Centre provision across England and Wales.
- Mechanisms to model the marginal savings generated by Women's Centres across departments, including the NHS, children's services, homelessness services and the criminal justice system.

Cross-government accountability would help ensure Women's Centres are embedded within wider strategies for prevention, family support and reducing inequalities, rather than being viewed solely through a criminal justice lens.

Recommendation 5**Invest in a sustainable national network of Women's Centres**

Women's Centres deliver proven benefits for women, children and public services, including reducing reoffending, improving family stability and lowering demand for crisis interventions. However, many centres rely on fragmented short-term funding arrangements that undermine long-term planning, service capacity and geographic coverage. As a result, access to Women's Centre provision is highly variable across the country, creating significant inequalities in the availability of specialist, gender-responsive support for girls, young women and mothers.

The government should establish multi-year funding arrangements that support both core infrastructure and practical enablers of engagement, including childcare, travel costs, crisis support and specialist provision. The government should work with local authorities and strategic authorities to ensure that every area has access to Women's Centre provision, whether through dedicated centres, outreach services or partnership models. This should include ensuring that Women's Centres are accessible to women before needs reach crisis point, rather than only serving those who might meet high thresholds for intervention. This investment should be viewed as a prevention measure that reduces demand on children's services, criminal justice agencies, homelessness services and the NHS, while improving outcomes for girls, women and families.

To inform investment decisions, the government should work in partnership with the voluntary and academic sectors to draw from and build an evidence base on the effectiveness of Women's Centre interventions, including emerging research on outcomes related to trauma, offending, health, homelessness and family wellbeing. The government should use this evidence to identify opportunities to reduce demand on statutory services, particularly in areas such as mental health, where Women's Centres can support women experiencing challenges linked to trauma, sexual violence and homelessness.

Recommendation 6**Improve support for care-experienced girls and young women**

Care-experienced girls and young women often face gender-specific challenges, including exploitation, abuse, poor mental health and difficult transitions into adulthood, yet support is not always designed with these needs in mind.

Local authorities should ensure that care-experienced girls and young women have access to gender-responsive support. Women's Centres should be recognised as important delivery partners, providing safe spaces, trusted relationships and specialist support tailored to the needs of young women.



**National Women's
Justice Coalition**