



**Women
in Prison**

The value of Women's Centres

September 2022

About Women in Prison

Women in Prison (WIP) is a national charity which provides independent, holistic, gender-specialist support to women facing multiple disadvantage, including women involved in (or at risk of being involved in) the criminal justice system. We work in prisons, the community and 'through the gate', supporting women leaving prison and in the community to address the root causes of offending. We run Women's Centres and 'hubs' for services in Manchester, London and Surrey.


Our combined services provide women with support and advocacy, relating to domestic and sexual abuse, mental health, harmful substance use, debt, education, training, employment, and parenting. Our campaigning is informed by our frontline support services for women, delivered at every stage of a woman's journey through the criminal justice system. The experience and knowledge of staff working directly with women affected by the criminal justice system enables us to see first-hand the effects of policy in practice and strengthen our recommendations for change.

About this report

We are grateful to the charitable trusts and funders who have supported our research and campaigns work to evidence and promote the value of Women's Centres. This report was produced by Women in Prison and informed by our partner Women's Centres, the Women4Change campaign group and our frontline staff. Thank you to everyone who provided valuable insight and expertise for this work.

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The Women's Centre

By Shay* member of Women4Change

The Women's Centre is welcoming and warm, a change from the world, where harm became the norm. I can speak freely to non-judgemental ears, a place I can comfortably relay my fears.

I can be reflective, for example, prison wasn't effective, it removed me from the problems that remained in wait, for the time I left the prison gate.

The people, places and playthings were still there, waiting to trap me in their lair. Thankfully I had the Centre, where they really cared. I wasn't on my own, alone and scared.

They cared about me as a person, didn't want my situation to worsen and I was signposted to resources that I required; counselling for my mental health, where my drug misuse and abuse transpired.

They safeguarded me against the violence, so thankfully, I no longer had to suffer in silence.

The Centre is a place where you can relax and exhale, where wellbeing will always prevail. You can participate in workshops such as singing and art therapy, where there is a sense of camaraderie.

Learning life skills such as budgeting – invaluable - as I always found this troubling. Interview tips and help preparing a CV, so I could work and give back to society.

The confidence they had in me made me believe in myself gradually. The world became my oyster eventually.

*Shay is not her real name

1. Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that women often endure the harshest impacts of social, health and economic inequalities and have been disproportionately affected by the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis.¹ Ensuring women at the sharpest end of society have the right support to overcome challenges relating to poverty, debt, housing, domestic abuse, harmful substance use, and mental and physical health strengthens communities and benefits us all. In England and Wales, too many women are being set up to fail and are met with punitive and disproportionate responses to the challenges they experience, rather than getting the support they need.

Around 100,000 women are swept into the criminal justice system in England and Wales every year.² The majority of women in this situation have been let down long before this point by state services and systems that have been unable to respond to their needs, including children's and adult social care, health, educational services and previous experience with criminal justice agencies when reporting abuse or violence. For Black, Asian, minoritised and migrant women and girls their experiences are often compounded by racism and discrimination. Black women in particular are more likely to be overpoliced, criminalised and receive disproportionately harsh treatment by the criminal justice system.³

Around two thirds of women in prison are reported to have experienced domestic abuse,⁴ although the true figure is likely to be far higher, and one third were in the care system at some point during their childhood.⁵ Rates of self-harm in women's prisons have continued to reach record levels over the past decade and too many women leave prison with no where safe to call home.⁶

There is another way. Women's Centres take an approach that encompasses all aspects of a woman's life and provide services and support from housing and finances to domestic abuse and harmful substance use. Women's Centres are based in local communities and enable women to maintain relationships with family and social networks, whilst also building and developing wider support systems.

“Women's Centres take an approach that encompasses all aspects of a woman's life.”

¹ Women's Budget Group (2022) [The gendered impact of the cost-of-living crisis](#); United Nations (2020) [Policy brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women](#)

² The average number of arrests of women per year in England and Wales between 2016/2017 to 2020/2021 is 99,600.

³ Ministry of Justice (2016) [Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic disproportionality in the Criminal Justice System in England and Wales](#); Lammy, D. (2017) [The Lammy Review](#)

⁴ Ministry of Justice (2018) Table 4.3 Supporting Data Tables Female Offender Strategy

⁵ Ministry of Justice (2021) [Prisoners' childhood and family backgrounds](#)

⁶ [An inspection by the HM Inspectorate of Prisons at HMP Bronzefield](#), a women's prison in Surrey, found that 65% of women were released without safe and stable accommodation.

At the core of this approach is strengths-based and collaborative support to enable women to move forward and heal from harmful cycles of trauma, disadvantage, and abuse. This tailored support provides women with the tools to enable them to not just survive but thrive. However, due to persistent underfunding and increased demand for services over and since the pandemic, the network of specialist Women's Centres remains geographically inconsistent, and struggling to meet the increasing levels of need.

This report builds on previous evidence by the Women's Budget Group,⁷ and provides the results from an independent cost-benefit analysis on the value of Women's Centres by Alma Economics. It also focuses on how Women's Centres operate and provides information about the challenges they are facing from a survey of Women's Centres and specialist women's services from across England and Wales.

We need to collectively work to end the harm of the criminal justice system to women, their families, and communities. This report demonstrates the value of Women's Centres in doing this and provides evidence about the importance of establishing a model of sustainable funding so they can continue their essential work.

“We need to collectively work to end the harm of the criminal justice system to women, their families, and communities.”

⁷ Women's Budget Group (2020) [The Case for Sustainable Funding for Women's Centres](#)

2. Executive summary

Independent advocates at Women's Centres support women to overcome barriers to accessing and navigating services and prioritise women's voices in decisions about treatment and support. The support is tailored to each woman and recognises the impacts of inequalities, trauma, violence, and abuse on women's lives. As previous research has identified, this approach is effective and works, enabling women to build positive futures for themselves and their families.⁸

The Women's Centre model is well established and has delivered positive outcomes for women, including women at risk of offending, or involved in the criminal justice system, over many years.⁹ There is already a network of around 40 Women's Centres across England and Wales with skilled staff who are experts in their field. But this currently isn't enough to meet the needs of all the women who would benefit from these services. **What is clear is that with sustainable funding, so much more could be achieved.**

Through independent analysis and a national survey of Women's Centres and specialist women's services, this report continues to build the evidence-base to further demonstrate the social and economic value and benefit that these services are already delivering.

Independent analysis by Alma Economics shows that the benefits generated by Women's Centres outweighs costs across different funding scenarios. The research found that a hypothetical Women's Centre receiving £1m investment in a given year can support over 650 women and generate £2.75m in

socio-economic benefits, including savings for public services and significant gains in welfare for women and their children. Through prevention and early intervention, support from Women's Centres can mean reducing long-term or crisis-point demands on services such as health and housing, more survivors accessing support for domestic abuse, and a reduction in the number of children entering the care system. Among the agencies and departments that benefit, nearly half (47%) of the public sector savings is returned to the local authority, 17% to the Ministry of Justice and 15% to the NHS.

However, the full potential of Women's Centres and the benefits that could be gained from their services is not currently being realised due to unsustainable funding arrangements. The provision of these projects and services is geographically inconsistent and many are unable to plan for the long term. Even where services do exist, the level of provision does not always match local demand.

“Independent analysis by Alma Economics shows that the benefits generated by Women's Centres outweighs costs across different funding scenarios.”

⁸ Tavin Institute (2019) [Why Women's Centres Work](#) report

⁹ Ministry of Justice (2015) [Justice Data Lab Re-Offending Analysis: Women's Centres throughout England](#),

The results of the survey¹⁰ outline the challenges that Women's Centres and specialist women's services are still experiencing. Only around half of the respondents said that they were likely to achieve full cost recovery on the contracts that they were delivering, and nine out of the 19 respondents were concerned about their organisational survival. Services also reported that as a result of the pandemic, the circumstances of women they supported changed, with more debt and financial issues materialising and an increased need for benefits and foodbank support. Services are facing a perfect storm of unstable funding, increasing demand and soaring costs at a time when the cost-of-living crisis is further increasing the needs of women and families.

“Services are facing a perfect storm of unstable funding, increasing demand and soaring costs at a time when the cost-of-living crisis is further increasing the needs of women and families.”

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Photo credited to Anawim Birmingham Centre for Women

¹⁰ 19 Women's Centres and specialist women's services responded to the survey that was conducted across December 2021-January 2022. Organisations were requested to provide information from their most recent reporting year, all of which were a 12-month period between March 2019 and March 2021.

3. Women and the criminal justice system

Women are a minority group in the criminal justice system comprising 4% of the prison population and 15% of the number of people on probation, which can mean their needs are overlooked. As evidence shows, women in contact with the criminal justice system experience many different challenges concurrently, otherwise known as experiencing multiple disadvantage.

The criminalisation of women is often underpinned by social and economic inequalities and experiences of poverty, debt, mental ill health, disability, harmful substance use, violence and abuse, and poor housing. Almost two thirds of women in prison report experiencing domestic abuse,¹¹ although the true figure is likely to be higher and 53% have faced emotional, physical or sexual abuse during childhood.¹² These experiences of trauma, combined with the greater likelihood of women being primary carers for dependent children, can result in imprisonment being particularly punitive and challenging. As many as seven in ten women in prison report experiencing mental ill health¹³ and the rate of self-harm is seven times higher than it is for men in prison.¹⁴

We know that women's experiences are not all the same and will be different based on their race, sexuality, gender identity, immigration status and disability due to structural discrimination. For instance, Black, Asian, minoritised and migrant women experience "double disadvantage"¹⁵ as a result of the combined impact of sexism and racism. In the criminal justice system, this sees Black women simultaneously overpoliced and under protected. Figures show that in England and Wales, Black women are over two times more likely to be arrested than White women and are more likely to receive a custodial sentence at the Crown Court.¹⁶ Yet when disclosing domestic abuse to the police, Black women are 14% less likely to be referred for specialist services than White women, denying them swift support which can often be a lifeline.¹⁷

“The criminalisation of women is often underpinned by social and economic inequalities.”

¹¹ Ministry of Justice (2018) Table 4.3 Supporting Data Tables Female Offender Strategy

¹² Ministry of Justice (2012) Prisoners' childhood and family backgrounds

¹³ HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2020) Annual Report 2019-2020

¹⁴ Ministry of Justice (2022) Safety in custody: quarterly update: to March 2022

¹⁵ 'Women in Prison and Agenda (2017) Double Disadvantage; Hibiscus Initiatives, Muslim Women in Prison, Zahid Mubarek Trust, Criminal Justice Alliance and Women in Prison (2022) Tackling Double Disadvantage 10 point action plan for change

¹⁶ Ministry of Justice (2016) Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic disproportionality in the Criminal Justice System in England and Wales

¹⁷ Refuge (2022) Refuge data shows Black women experiencing domestic abuse less likely to be referred for specialist support by police

Over half (56%) of women entering prison each year are there on remand, awaiting trial.¹⁸ More than four out of five women (84%) remanded from the Magistrates' Court and two in five (41%) remanded from the Crown Court, don't go on to receive an immediate custodial sentence.¹⁹ Two thirds of women sentenced to prison are there for 12 months or less.²⁰

Most aspects of life cannot be put on pause for the duration of a prison sentence. The consequences of any period in prison can be significant and long-lasting, impacting children and family relationships,²¹ physical and mental wellbeing, employment, housing

and in some cases locking women into poverty, debt and homelessness on release. Even a short period in prison is enough time to lose your children, home and job.

Prisons are not appropriate or safe places to address the root causes of offending. Women released from prison are more likely to be swept back into the criminal justice system than those serving community sentences.²² Almost six in ten (58%) women reoffend in the first 12 months of leaving prison, which increases to over seven in ten (73%) for women who have served sentences of less than a year.²³



Photo credited to Women in Prison

¹⁸ Ministry of Justice (2022) [Offender Management quarterly, Prison receptions](#)

¹⁹ Wolfson, Lord (2022) [Parliamentary question UIN HL7260 Remand in custody: females](#)

²⁰ Ministry of Justice (2021) [Offender Management Statistics quarterly: April to June 2021, Prison receptions: April to June 2021](#)

²¹ Ministry of Justice (2019) [The Farmer review for women](#)

²² Hedderman, C. and Jolliffe, D. (2015) [The Impact of Prison for Women on the Edge: Paying the Price for Wrong Decisions](#)

²³ Prison Reform Trust (2019) [The Bromley Briefings](#)

4. How Women's Centres work

What are Women's Centres?

Women's Centres are community-based services that provide tailored support covering every aspect of women's lives, taking into account their specific experiences. These services are by women, for women and offer support to any women who might benefit, including women in contact with, or at risk of contact with the criminal justice system.

Women's Centres are developed locally, usually by grassroots women's organisations, to meet need in a particular community and can be in a range of spaces, including high street shop fronts, churches and converted houses or offices. Occasionally they are purpose-built, some have access to a crèche and others have 'hubs' where services are available on particular days in surrounding areas.

Research has shown that to get the right range of support, women may need to access multiple and often fragmented services across a range of organisations in different locations, which increases their barriers to access.²⁴ In addition to this, many standard services will have been designed around a male service-user by default, and can sometimes be male dominated in practice, such as drug and alcohol services. This means women's specific needs around experiences of trauma or domestic abuse have not been fully considered in the design and delivery of these services.

Women's Centres can effectively bridge these gaps by providing a range of services in one

location. They are often known as being 'one-stop-shops' and usually offer access to specialist advocacy, advice and support on housing, debt, harmful substance use, mental and physical health, training, employment and education, domestic abuse and family and parenting issues – all under one roof – as illustrated on page 13. These programmes are either delivered through in-house specialist staff or via multi-agency partnerships, recognising the advantages of coordinating different services to work in collaboration.

Women's Centres provide understanding environments that take into account responses to trauma and work with women in a non-judgemental way. Due to this approach, they are often able to reach and engage women who might otherwise feel alienated by standard service provision. As Women's Centres address the root causes of offending such as mental ill health, harmful substance use and homelessness, they provide essential services that can prevent women from being swept into the criminal justice system.

“Women's Centres provide understanding environments that take into account responses to trauma and work with women in a non-judgemental way.”

²⁴ Agenda (2017) [Mapping the Maze: Services for women experience multiple disadvantages in England and Wales](#)

What support do Women’s Centres provide?

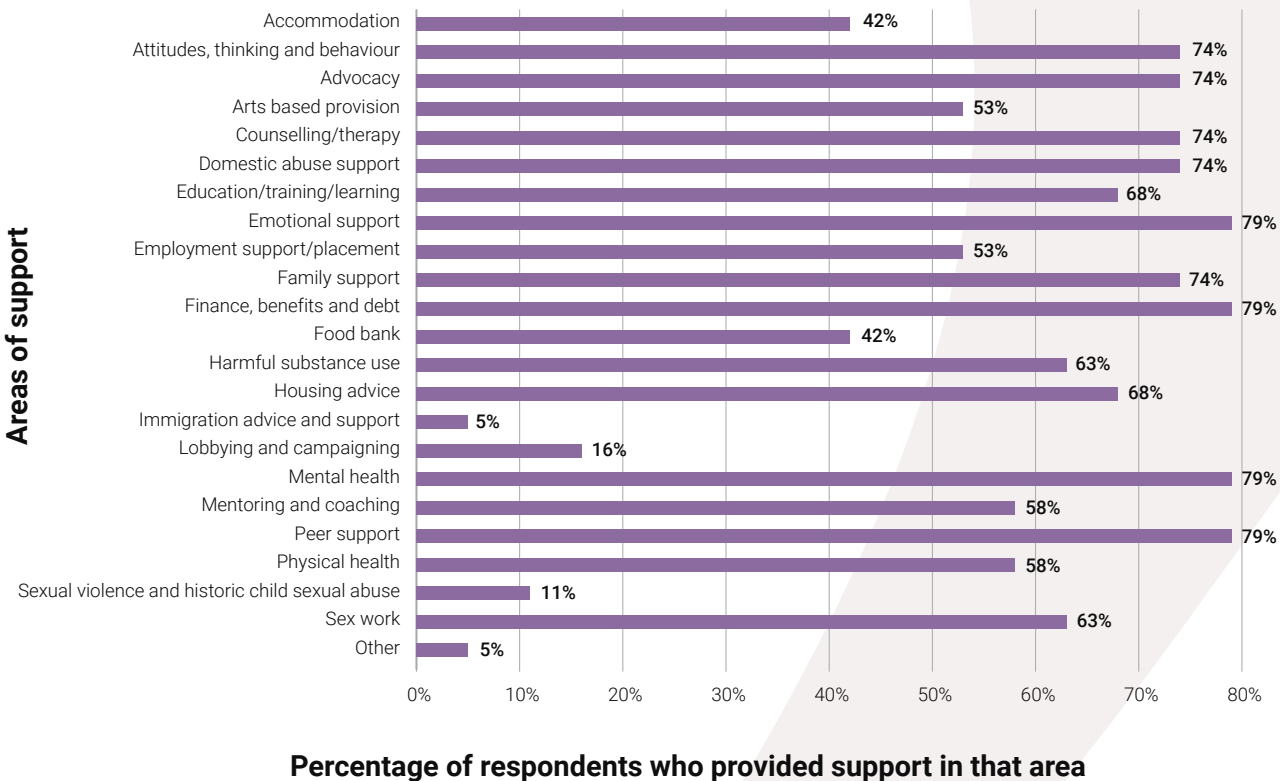
Women in Prison conducted a survey of Women’s Centres and specialist women’s services across England and Wales. Figure 1 demonstrates the wide range of support on offer from the Women’s Centres and specialist women’s services surveyed. Of the 19 respondents, around three quarters of Women’s Centres and specialist women’s services surveyed offered counselling and/or therapy, practical and emotional support on domestic abuse, finance, benefits and debt, mental health, physical health, family and relationships, programmes around thinking, attitudes and behaviour and independent advocacy. The Women’s Centres also work in close partnership with local agencies to ensure needs are met even when in-house specialism is not available.

Many Women’s Centres provide services to facilitate diversion at the point of arrest and provide advocacy for women in the community, in prison, ‘through the gate’ and after release. They do this in a variety of ways, including floating support, outreach and resettlement support, drop-in services, and group work.

Women can refer themselves to these services or be referred through external agencies including health and social care, drug and alcohol services, probation, liaison and diversion by police, courts and through other charities. Women’s Centres also refer women to other partner agencies and specialist women’s services, for example organisations providing specialist support and advocacy for pregnant women, or Black, Asian, minoritised and migrant women.

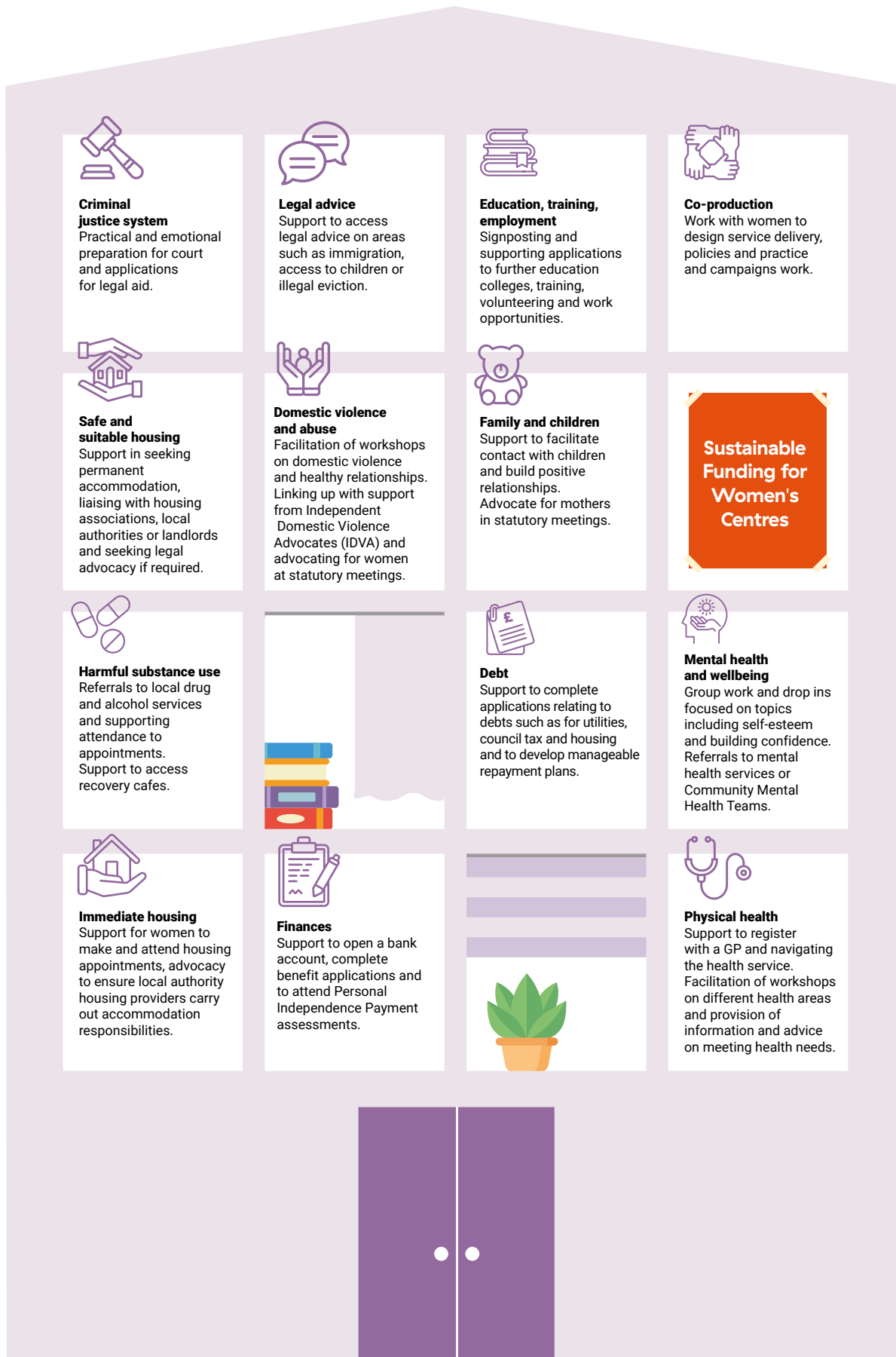
In the vast majority of cases, Women’s Centres are run independently of public bodies such as the local authority, police and probation service and do not have a role in punishment or enforcement of sentences. This is vital because women coming to Women’s Centres have often lost trust in state agencies over a long period from childhood. This independence also means that women can choose to re-engage with their local Women’s Centre at a later date if they consider they could benefit from further support. Women’s Centres provide a stable anchor, enabling women to connect to their communities over the long term.

Figure 1: Areas of support provided by respondents



Building blocks of support

Women's Centres provide support that encompasses all aspects of a woman's life, usually under one roof by in house specialist staff and through partnerships with other agencies. This image represents the different blocks of support that can be offered to enable women to rebuild their lives.



How are Women's Centres funded?

Women's Centres often have a complex mix of funding from local authorities, health, police, probation, and independent funders, like trusts and foundations. Many also fundraise locally to support their services.

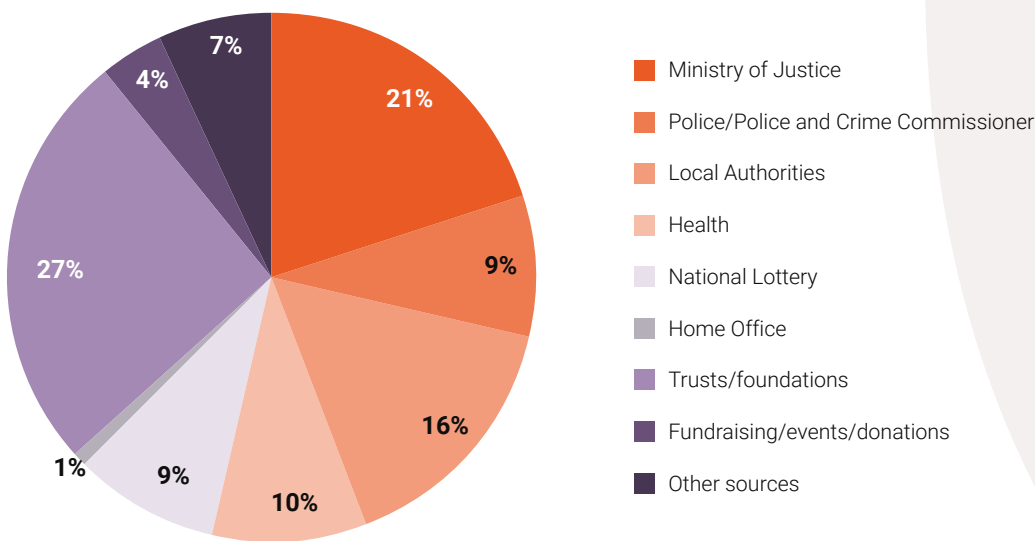
A report by the Women's Budget Group making *The Case for Sustainable Funding for Women's Centres*, highlighted that specialist women's services have been negatively impacted by cuts and competitive tendering processes for nationally and locally commissioned services. It identified that each Women's Centre was typically relying on 20 or more separate funding streams, all with different delivery and reporting timeframes and requirements, resulting in a constant need to identify new funding opportunities. This makes it very difficult to describe a 'typical' local funding picture or to measure the current investment and the gap between that and what is needed.

Respondents to our survey show organisations all had different funding pictures. When taken together, over one quarter (27%) of their funding was from trusts and foundations,

followed by the Ministry of Justice (21%) and local authorities (16%) as figure 2 details.

Some Women's Centres deliver rehabilitation and resettlement services as part of contracts in partnership with probation. In 2021 charities and private providers competed via the Dynamic Purchasing Framework. This is a mechanism set up by the Ministry of Justice to procure services as part of the renationalisation of probation services which included a specific lot for women's services recognising the distinctive needs of women. £45m was awarded to 15 organisations across England and Wales to provide services for women for three years and nine months (approximately £12.6m annually, inclusive of mobilisation costs). There were concerns from many specialist women's services that the funding offered was insufficient to carry out the service and associated reporting arrangements set out, and several areas did not receive any initial bids as a result. The current funding from the Ministry of Justice is largely limited to providing support to women on probation and whilst important, this falls short of realising the full potential of Women's Centres.

Figure 2: Percentage of funding received according to funding source



What do women say about Women's Centres?

Every day, hundreds of women across England and Wales engage with their local Women's Centres. Previous research has shown that the practical and emotional support is highly valued by women, as well as the safe and non-stigmatising environments that Women's Centres strive to create.²⁵ In June 2022, Women in Prison held a workshop with four women from the Women4Change group, who have all benefitted from Women's Centre services to capture an insight into their views and experiences.

The key themes that emerged identified Women's Centres as being:

- Places of safety and trust
- Places to build self-confidence and self-belief
- Places to receive a range of support
- Inclusive places to be yourself

Places of safety and trust

Women's Centres were described as places of safety and trust, which are two key elements in trauma-informed practice. Women felt as though they could speak about their experiences and needs in a supportive and compassionate environment with peers and independent advocates.

"I felt as though I was in safe hands at my Women's Centre."

"In my journey I have not been able to trust in anyone. But I know that the Women's Centre has my needs and interests first above everything else."

Places to build self-confidence and self-belief

Another key theme that emerged was the self-confidence and self-belief that women developed through the non-judgmental support provided by skilled support workers.

"You go through your life thinking you are not worthy, [my independent advocate] believed in me and I started believing in myself."

"You are seen as a human being, as a person, not what you have been charged for, not your history."

Women's Centres were described as giving women the space they need to realise their worth, focus on their strengths, and rebuild their lives independently from the punishment systems which have denied them agency.

"The value of Women's Centres is priceless. You can't put a price on someone's soul, their self-esteem and belief of themselves. You tend to think you are a bad person because these things have happened to you, and you end up in prison. But you can't put a price on people giving that back to you."

"We hold shame, guilt and fear around some of the stuff that has happened in our lives. My support worker explained that all the stuff that has happened doesn't define you. You are resilient to get through it."

Places to receive a range of support

The group highlighted the wide range of activities provided at Women's Centres. They valued the specialist knowledge and support provided by independent advocates and peer support mentors to enable them to achieve their personal aims and goals. The support provided was described as informative and accessible.

"Women's Centres are the central hub for everything you need, like the nerve centre."

"You can receive a universal package of support all in one place. It takes the stress and pressure off an individual to carry it all at once and try to navigate different services at the same time."

²⁵ Radcliffe and Hunter, (2013) The development and impact of community services for women offenders: an evaluation: The Institute for Criminal Policy Research

Women also valued the agency they had in deciding the support they wanted, and the guidance and direction provided by Women's Centres.

"My advocate did not hand me a check list of what I needed to do. Instead, they had an approach where they asked me what I needed help with."

"You might not know what to ask for at the point of referral, but because of their training and experience they are able to suggest things to you that you might not know about, they direct you as to where to go."

Two women also highlighted the value of the joined-up support provided by Women's Centres with different agencies, particularly probation.

"I kept on having to relay personal information to new probation workers time and time again. It was retraumatising, whereas my advocate bridged this gap and could share this information on for me."

"A massive part of what [my Women's Centre worker] did was make it cohesive between me and probation. They ensured it was a cohesive communication channel and not rigid, this was vital for me."

Inclusive places where you can be yourself

Finally, women felt that Women's Centres provided inclusive spaces to be yourself, to relax and to not be judged.

"A Women's Centre is somewhere to be you. You don't have to explain yourself."

"You don't feel judged when you go there."

Participants spoke of feeling understood and less isolated as a result of building positive relationships with people who have similar or shared experiences.

"You feel a sense of empowerment with other women."

"I felt understood by people at [the Women's Centre] - whether that is other women or members of staff as well."

The value of Women's Centres, as experienced by the participants, were contrasted to the lack of support from the criminal justice system and related agencies.

"There is no after care when you come out of prison. You are told to meet a probation officer and all they want to know is whether you have committed a crime or not, or whether you are at risk of committing a crime."

"Removing someone from their problems for one or two years [in prison] does not solve the issues they are facing. It is more effective to tackle the issues and address problems in order to prevent it from happening again."

"Before I was connected to [my local Women's Centre] I felt apprehensive, hopeless and scared."

"I was overwhelmed when I left prison. I was there for a long time and things had changed so much since I was inside. Having a worker by my side was so uplifting."



5. National policy context

The publication of the Government's 2018 strategy for women in contact with the criminal justice system laid out a blueprint for change and pledged to follow the evidence about what works.²⁶ The strategy committed to reduce the number of women in prison and to focus on community alternatives. In doing so, it recognised that women should be given the support they need to address the root causes of their offending in community settings and that early intervention is essential to reduce the number of women entering the criminal justice system.

"[T]he broad ambitions set out in this strategy include[es] fewer women in prison, earlier and more appropriate intervention, diversion, strong partnership working, and rehabilitative support for women."

It also acknowledged that community-based services like Women's Centres are effective at reducing re-offending, that the provision of these services across the country is "patchy" and that the availability and sustainability of these services is "essential" for delivering the vision outlined above.

"We recognise that the availability and sustainability of these services, such as women's centres, is essential for ensuring that we can deliver the vision we have outlined."

Four years later, the National Audit Office²⁷ and the Public Accounts Committee²⁸ have

criticised the Government's "disappointing" progress on implementing their own strategy and identified that limited funding was allocated to resource the strategy.

Small pockets of grant funding have been made available by the Ministry of Justice to Women's Centres and specialist women's service each year since the publication of the strategy. However, this funding has consistently been short term (to be spent within six months to one year), inadequate (£9.5m across five years for women's services in England and Wales) and has failed to safeguard the future of the network of Women's Centres. As reported by the National Audit Office, the Ministry of Justice was aware that this funding was only a small part of what would be needed to create sufficient provision of community services.²⁹

In September 2022 the Ministry of Justice announced £21m funding for women's services working in the criminal justice system over three years.

Published in 2021, two and a half years after the strategy, the National Concordat on women in or at risk of contact with the criminal justice system sets out how the Government and other partners should work together to identify and respond to the needs of women. It aims to encourage partnerships between organisations with responsibility for health, social care, education, employment, welfare

²⁶ Ministry of Justice (2018) Female Offender Strategy

²⁷ National Audit Office (2022) [Improving outcomes for women in the criminal justice system](#)

²⁸ Public Accounts Committee (2022) [Improving outcomes for women in the criminal justice system](#)

²⁹ National Audit Office (2022) [Improving outcomes for women in the criminal justice system](#)

and housing at both the national and local level to deliver a Whole Systems Approach to support women to access provision successfully and where relevant, divert women away from the criminal justice system.

Regretfully the Concordat has lacked any dedicated funding to deliver the collaborative model it promoted until recently. The Ministry of Justice announced in September 2022 that they were providing £3.6m seed funding over three years for statutory organisations to help support the development of a whole systems approach in local areas.

The national signatories include Department for Education, Department for Work and Pensions, Department for Health and Social Care, Home Office, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities³⁰ and HM Treasury. Despite the Government recognising the value of Women’s Centres in delivering

this joined up approach to address women’s needs and prevent contact with the criminal justice system, no cross-departmental funding has been allocated to Women’s Centres in the spending reviews and budgets that have followed the National Concordat’s publication.

Women’s Centres have a key role to play in delivering early intervention, diversion and preventative services. However, the network of Women’s Centres across the country are not currently able to reach their full potential due to existing funding arrangements, with many contracts limiting them to working with specific cohorts of women, such as women who have already offended. More needs to be done across central government to ensure these vital services have long-term sustainable funding that covers the breadth and depth of their work and to help make the Government’s broad ambitions to see fewer women in prison a reality.



Photo credit to Women in Prison

³⁰ *Formerly Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

6. Local policy contexts

A core element of the Government's strategy is empowering local areas to develop approaches to women in the criminal justice system in a way that meets local needs and circumstances. The value of specialist support is broadly recognised by local commissioners. For example, around nine in ten Police and Crime Commissioners believed that specialist programmes for women in contact with the criminal justice system had a pivotal role to play in reducing reoffending and supporting women in this group who are also victims of crime.³¹

There is a clear 'postcode lottery' in the rates of women's imprisonment. For every 100,000 women in Clevedon in North East England, 43 women were sentenced to immediate custody in 2019. This is almost five times greater than the rate of imprisonment of women in Surrey, which is as low as nine women per 100,000.³²

The variation largely results from pockets of local good practice, including the establishment of a Whole Systems Approach, problem solving courts and liaison and diversion schemes, often led by Women's Centres in collaboration with other local services. However, the provision of these projects and services are geographically inconsistent.

Some local areas, such as London, Lincolnshire and Manchester, have led the way in developing strong partnership working and integrated

service delivery between different stakeholders and have pooled resources from across various areas to ensure women have access to the services when they need them. For example, Greater Manchester has seen a 60% reduction in the use of immediate prison sentences under six months for women³³ since embedding a Whole Systems Approach from 2014.³⁴

Local stakeholders involved in these approaches include NHS trusts, councils, adult social care, Police and Crime Commissioners, probation, and charities all working together to support prevention, early intervention and diversion to specialist support such as Women's Centres. This is where energy and resources should be focused at a national and local level to secure improved outcomes for women and society.

Many Women's Centres work in partnership with other local specialist organisations that provide services designed and delivered 'by and for' communities they identify with, for example, Black and minoritised women, deaf and disabled women and LGBTQ+ people. This is particularly important given that women with protected characteristics are often overrepresented in the criminal justice system.³⁵ Through shared experiences and specialist expertise, 'by and for' organisations are well placed to understand and respond to the impacts of racism, disability discrimination, homophobia, biphobia and transphobia that

³¹ Centre for Social Justice (2018) [A Women-Centred Approach](#)

³² Prison Reform Trust (2020) [Rates of immediate custody in England and Wales by Police Force Area](#)

³³ 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](#)

³⁴ Kinsella, R. et al (2018) [Whole System Approach for women offenders final evaluation report](#)

³⁵ Almost half (48%) of women in prison report they have a disability, 24% identify as LGBTQ+ and 16% say they are from a 'minority ethnic group' according to the surveys conducted by HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2020) [Annual report](#)

has underpinned some women's lives.

These organisations tend to be systemically disadvantaged by commissioning processes which are often less accessible to smaller organisations with fewer resources and which often fail to recognise the added value 'by and for' providers.³⁶ Those that exist struggle to sustain themselves based on a patchwork of relatively short-term funding streams with many local areas having no specialist support. For example, research has found that LGBT+ specialist domestic abuse services are largely unavailable within many local authority areas in England and Wales, and that there is less access to specialist help for forms of violence that disproportionately affect Black and minoritised women such as forced marriage, Female Genital Mutilation, and so-called 'honour-based' violence.³⁷

The postcode lottery of services must be tackled by levelling up access to vital specialist provision in every local authority across the country. Local areas must conduct mapping of existing need and provision to get a clear sense of how women currently access support and where there are gaps in specialism.

With additional funding, Women's Centres which are already fully established could expand their provision and support a greater number of women, including through developing 'hubs' in underserved areas, which are linked to established Women's Centres.

“The postcode lottery of services must be tackled by levelling up access to vital specialist provision in every local authority across the country.”

³⁶ Imkaan (2018) [From survival to sustainability](#); Women's Resource Centre (2018) [Life-Changing and Life-Saving Funding for the Women's Sector](#); Prison Reform Trust and Hibiscus initiatives (2022) [Still no way out, foreign national women and trafficked women in the criminal justice system](#)

³⁷ Women's Resource Centre (2019) [Women's equality in England](#)

7. What challenges are Women's Centres facing?

Sustainable funding

"We are always walking on a tightrope."

The insecurity of short-term funding and funding that falls short of service costs remain significant challenges for Women's Centres and specialist women's services. Almost half (47%, n=9) of respondents said that in their last reporting year, they were running an area of their service which they had not received dedicated funding for from statutory agencies, trusts or independent funders.

The areas of service which were unfunded included counselling services, therapy groups and drop-in sessions. One Women's Centre reported that whilst specific contracts cover particular activities and projects, their core costs were unfunded such as the general day-to-day operations. Other organisations said that they had no dedicated funding for staff training or staff salaries or whole projects and workshops.

"The funding we do receive is often time-restricted and project restricted, which is frustrating as our important core business is rarely funded."

This lack of dedicated funding affected Women's Centres and specialist women's services in different ways. Many reported that this has a direct impact on staffing, including having to run services with fewer staff than required and staff having to work over and above their capacity and being very "tired and stretched" as a result. Other organisations had to make redundancies or reduce some services. Women's

Centres spoke of the uncertainty over the sustainability of the projects and services in question and the pressure that this has put on the organisations reserves and fundraising.

"The lack of dedicated funding has meant that we haven't been able to expand services to meet the ever-growing need."

For one Women's Centre, the lack of dedicated funding for emergency support for clients, such as accommodation, food and basic supplies meant that the charity covered these costs from their reserves.

The Women's Budget Group identified that as a result of short term and insecure funding streams, staff with specialist skills would have to be put on notice of redundancy (a legal requirement if funding remains unconfirmed and it is foreseeable that they might lose their jobs).³⁸ Of the 19 respondents, four organisations had to put staff on redundancy notice in their most recent reporting year. 26 staff in total were put on redundancy notice, and nine were made redundant from their posts. Two were able to be relocated onto other projects within the same organisation. This constant job uncertainty and forced movement of staff with specialist skills can negatively impact staff retention, service quality and relationships built with other agencies and women receiving services.

The underfunding of contracts has been consistently highlighted through the Clink's State of the Sector research as an issue impacting voluntary organisations that support people

³⁸ Women's Budget Group (2020) [The Case for Sustainable Funding for Women's Centres](#)

in contact with the criminal justice system.³⁹ The results from our survey of Women’s Centres and specialist women’s services, as shown in figure 3, found that only half of respondents said they were “likely” to achieve full cost recovery on the contracts they were delivering. 39% of respondents said that they were unlikely to achieve full cost recovery on the contracts they were delivering, meaning that the funding they were receiving was likely to fall short of actual service delivery costs.

Over half the respondents to the survey said their organisation has brought a project to an end over their last reporting year (figure 4). Nine of the 10 organisations that stopped a service during this period said that funding coming to an end was the reason for stopping the service. The projects that ended included mental health casework, projects on sexual exploitation, therapeutic groups on addressing trauma, projects in prisons and peer support.

Figure 4: Have you brought any projects or services to an end in your recent reporting year?

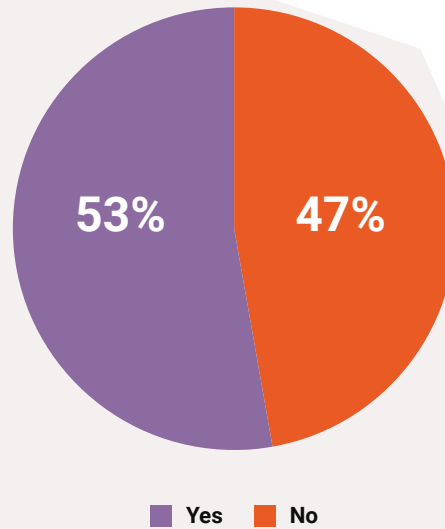
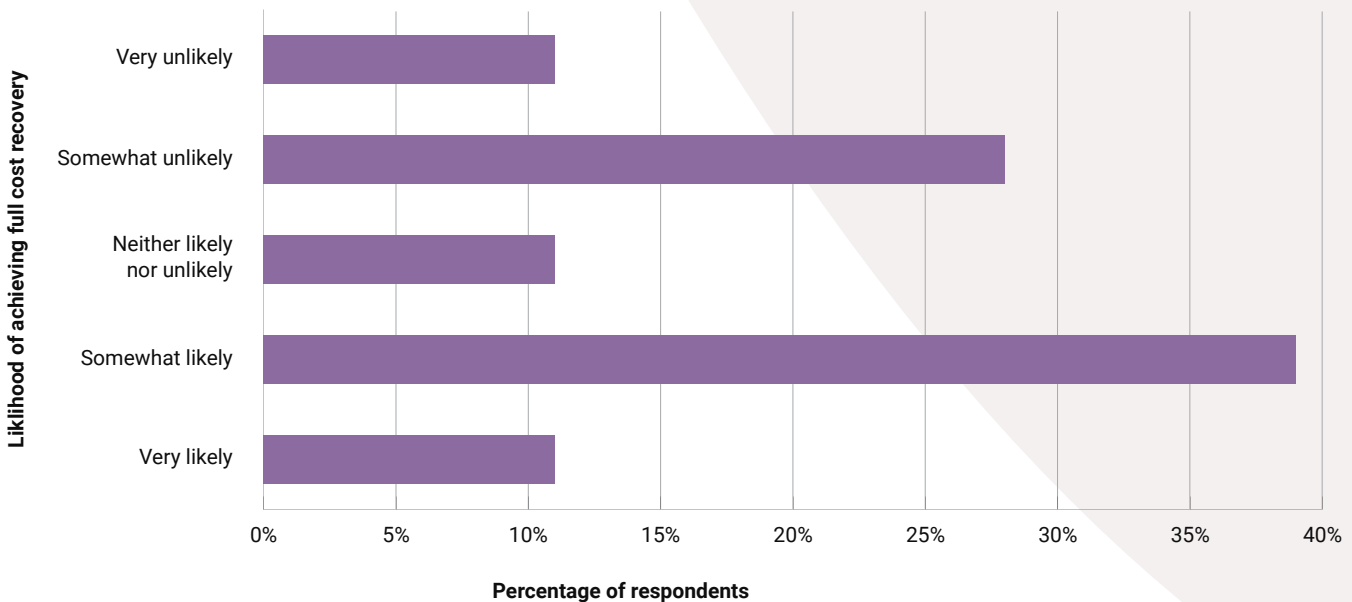


Figure 3: How likely are you to achieve full cost recovery on the contracts you are delivering?



³⁹ Clinks (2022) State of the sector 2021

Impact of Covid-19

“The Covid-19 funding was very useful in supporting women through the initial crisis but impacted on the long-term sustainability of the organisation.”

“Many of the major funders paused their main funds to prioritise Covid funding. This impacted on the long-term funding planning.”

Respondents said the support provided by women’s services during Covid-19 was focused on day-to-day self-management and mental health rather than on other needs, particularly because other community services to address those needs were not operating. Some services were providing this support over the phone or operating at reduced capacity due to not being able to hold ‘drop in’ spaces or run their projects and workshops within the constraints of the Covid-19 regulations.

89% of respondents received emergency Covid-19 funding in their most recent reporting year. Of these, six organisations said that this funding equated to one fifth or more of their overall funding for that year. None of the Women’s Centres or specialist women’s services who received any additional funding expected this funding would be sustained over the coming year.

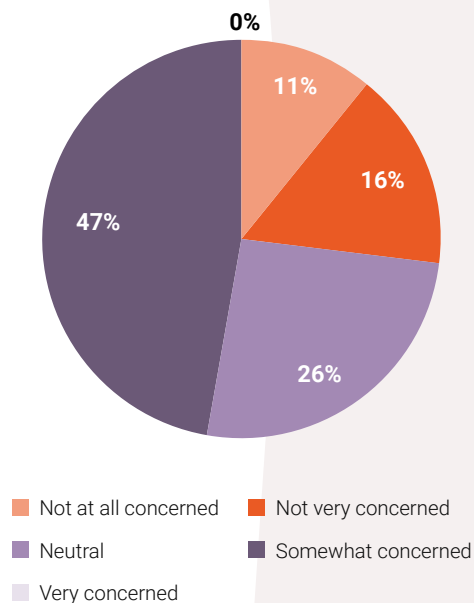
Respondents reported that as a result of the pandemic, the needs of the women they supported changed, with more debt and financial issues materialising, increased demand for benefit support and foodbank support and an increase in mental ill health. Many women and their families went through financial difficulties, relying on food donations and with limited access to affordable products. Women who were sex working or exploited through prostitution reported an increase in sexual violence and drug use.

Organisations’ future

Around half of the organisations responded that they were “somewhat concerned” about their survival (47%), although no organisation was

“very concerned”. Over one quarter (27%) were not at all concerned, or not very concerned about their organisational survival.

Figure 5: To what extent are you concerned about your organisational survival?



One organisation highlighted that the new probation contracts from the Ministry of Justice have afforded a “level of stability alongside other more established funding streams.” However, the majority of Women’s Centres and specialist women’s services said that they were very concerned about their funding stability and that increasing their funding and sustainability of their services was a priority for the coming year. For some services this included securing “break even funding” for their existing services or ensuring core work is funded, such as funding the Chief Executive post for their organisation.

At present, Women’s Centres and specialist women’s services are facing a perfect storm of unstable funding, increased demand in recovery from the impact of the pandemic and soaring costs at a time when the cost-of-living crisis will further increase the needs of women and families.

8. Saving money, who benefits?

Women in Prison commissioned Alma Economics to carry out an independent analysis on the costs and benefits generated by Women's Centres. Three Women's Centres provided data on needs and outcomes of women who use their services and operational data on funding and costs. Representatives from six Women's Centres were interviewed by Alma Economics to inform the modelling framework.

Based on monitoring data from the Women's Centres, Alma Economics developed a case study outlining a hypothetical example Women's Centre and the support it offers to women experiencing multiple disadvantages.

Whilst based on data from three Women's Centres, the analysis is intended to act as a hypothetical example of the benefits of investing in Women's Centres. The application of this model will vary according to local differences in the level of needs of women and the costs of providing support.

The analysis finds that a hypothetical example Women's Centre receiving £1m investment in a given year can support over 650 women and generate £2.75m in socio-economic benefits, including savings for public services and gains in welfare for women and their children. These economic and social benefits are paid back over a five-year time period, outweighing all costs related to service delivery.

The modelling shows that Women's Centres can make cost savings across multiple areas with benefits to health, welfare, housing and children's services. As figure 6 shows, the financial benefits are particularly felt by local authorities (47%), the Ministry of Justice (17%), the National Health Service (15%), the Police (10%), the Department for Work and Pensions (9%) and HM Revenue and Customs (2%).

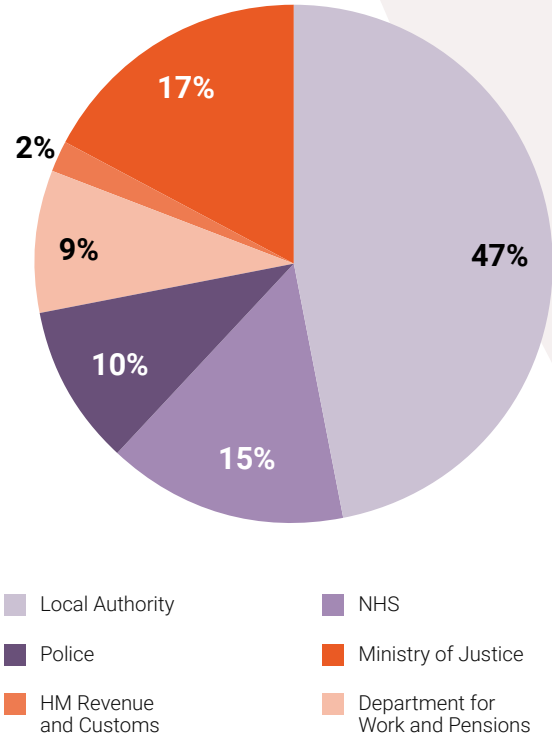
This analysis demonstrates that the value of Women's Centres and specialist women's services extends way beyond the criminal justice system with benefits and savings spreading across multiple departments and public services. The funding of Women's Centres and specialist women's services therefore lends itself to the cross-government partnership approach described in the strategy for women in contact with the criminal justice system.

Present value of costs and benefits for women and society of the hypothetical Women's Centre	
Present value of total costs	£1,000,000
Present value of total benefits	£2,753,561
Net present value	£1,753,561
Benefit Cost Ratio (BCR)	2.75

Table 1 summarises the total costs and benefits for beneficiaries and society based on the Alma Economics modelling framework. Further detail of the research methodology and modeling framework is available in the appendix.

Ensuring that each local area is covered by a sustainable network of specialist provision will in the long term see stronger and safer communities. This service model has been established and developed over decades, but the growth and sustainability of this network requires cross-government leadership and investment, which is yet to be fully realised.

Figure 6: Savings returned to public services



9. Recommendations

Specialist providers of Women’s Centres related services have proven their resilience and innovation, have track records of delivering under pressure and a trustworthiness that stems from a genuine commitment to the work they undertake in local areas to support women.

The Public Accounts Committee urged the Ministry of Justice to “spend to save” on community services for women to reduce reoffending.⁴⁰ This analysis demonstrates that there is a strong case to go further, since multiple departments and

agencies can benefit through the services delivered by Women’s Centres and specialist services.

The Government has already acknowledged that the needs of women facing multiple disadvantage cannot be addressed in isolation by different departments. The Government must now work with local commissioners, Women’s Centres and specialist women’s services to ensure we can collectively meet the needs of women and end the harm of the criminal justice system to women, their families, and communities.

For local agencies and commissioners

1. **The postcode lottery of services must be tackled by levelling up access to vital specialist provision for women in every local authority across the country and establishing a model of sustainable funding.**
 - a. Local commissioners, including local authorities, local health commissioners, Police and Crime Commissioners and Regional Probation Directors, should use the National Concordat to build on or develop a local Whole Systems Approach for women in or at risk of contact with the criminal justice system. This should be supported through pooled funding and co-commissioned grant programmes.
 - b. Where there are no local Women’s Centre services, local commissioners should engage with neighbouring Women’s Centres and specialist women’s services to help determine how to meet the needs of women in that locality.
 - c. Local commissioners should as standard practice provide longer

term funding of at least three years and through the provision of grants to specialist women’s organisations where possible.

For central government

1. **The Department for Health and Social Care, the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and the Ministry of Justice must collectively “spend to save” to improve outcomes for women**
 - a. Government departments should commit to developing a cross-departmental fund in the next spending review to ensure sustainable long-term funding for Women’s Centres and specialist women’s services that covers the breadth and depth of their work. This fund should include grant funding for core costs.
 - b. The cross-departmental fund must include ring-fenced funding for specialist services led ‘by and for’ women with protected characteristics, including Black and minoritised women, deaf and disabled women and LGBTQ+ women.

⁴⁰ Public Accounts Committee (2022) Improving outcomes for women in the criminal justice system

10. Appendix

1. Survey methodology and respondents

Women in Prison conducted a survey to map the landscape of the sector and hear from Women’s Centres across England and Wales on the challenges they are facing. Nineteen Women’s Centres and specialist women’s services responded to the survey that was conducted across December 2021-January 2022. Organisations were requested to provide information from their most recent reporting year, all of which were a 12-month period between March 2019 and March 2021.

There is a significant variation in the size of the organisations responding to the survey. The number of staff employed ranged from four people to 111. The median number of staff is 27. Ten respondents (53%) had annual incomes of under £1m and nine respondents had an annual income of over £1m.

The respondents were geographically spread across the country, providing provision in a part of every region in England and Wales, apart from the North East England. Eight respondents provided services across three counties or more.

Figure 7: Total annual income for most recent reporting year



2. Cost benefit analysis methodology

Women in Prison commissioned Alma Economics to carry out an independent analysis on the costs and benefits generated by Women's Centres. Three Women's Centres provided data on needs and outcomes of women who use their services and operational data on funding and costs. Representatives from six Women's Centres were interviewed by Alma to inform the modelling framework.

From this data, in combination with the best available evidence in the literature, a logic model was developed that presents how benefits are generated through the support provided by the Women's Centres. The logic model outlines a woman's pathway from being referred (or directly reaching out) to a Women's Centre, to receiving specialist services and experiencing positive outcomes in areas such as employment, mental health, domestic violence, crime, homelessness, incidents of children going into local authority care, harmful substance use, confidence and self-esteem, as well as emotional wellbeing.

The following stages are included in the model:

- **Inputs:** including financial and human resources (that is, funding and staffing including employees and volunteers) required for the Centre to operate and offer specialist gender specific support.
- **Outputs:** representing immediate actions following inputs – that is, assessments of women's needs, development of safety plans, receipt of services based on each woman's safety plan, as well as women's engagement with the services and retention.
- **Outcomes:** reflecting intermediate targets of outputs – that is, effects of safety plans and services on key areas of women's life, for example finding a job.
- **Impact:** capturing cost savings for the public purse and social benefits accruing to women, children and society as a result of improved outcomes for women (i.e., outcomes).

The hypothetical Women's Centre model was created to address variations in the services offered by the different Women's Centres across England and Wales, as well as the differences in funding, costs and needs of women being referred. It provides the basis for quantifying the mechanisms linking costs to wider benefits that can flow from the Women's Centres, contributing to a wider understanding of the Women's Centres impact at the national level (rather than in specific geographies with unique characteristics).

Modelling framework for the cost benefit analysis of Women's Centres

The table on the following page displays the measures that were used by Alma Economics as part of the cost benefit analysis of Women's Centres. Alma Economics used the Greater Manchester Combined Authority Cost Benefit Analysis framework to link the costs of providing Women's Centre services to women with multiple disadvantages to socio-economic benefits in key areas. The framework captures the costs of running a Women's Centre, as well as benefits that are identifiable and quantifiable (tangible benefits) and benefits that cannot be directly measured (intangible benefits) flowing from the support offered to women. Tangible benefits such as cost savings due to reduced use of public sector services are quantified. Intangible benefits such as gains in welfare from improved personal outcomes for women (such as health and wellbeing) are monetised using evidence from the literature aiming to quantify non-market social outcomes.

	Outcomes		Benefits	Who does benefit accrue to?	Target	Pop notes/	Affected	Affected pop notes/ assumptions	Level of	%		% retention notes /	% impact	% impact notes / assumptions / sources
B1	Increased	Yes	1) Fiscal benefit of moving people off benefits and into work, 2) Improved health outcomes, 3) Increased income	1) DWP/HMT	667	667 supported in the Women's Centre	67	Number of women receiving JSA	100%	All women engage with the Women's Centres services	45%	31 women are retained in the services	45%	14 women move into employment
B2		Yes		2) DH	667	667 supported in the Women's Centre	67	Number of women receiving ESA/IB	100%	All women engage with the Women's Centres services	45%	30 women are retained in the services	45%	14 women move into employment
B3		Yes		3)	667	667 supported in the Women's Centre	67	Number of women receiving LPIS	100%	All women engage with the Women's Centres services	45%	30 women are retained in the services	45%	13 women move into employment
B5	Mental health	Yes	Reduced health cost of interventions	NHS/	667	667 supported in the Women's Centre	434	Number of women with mental health needs	100%	All women engage with the Women's Centres services	60%	261 women are retained in the services	45%	118 improve their mental health status
B7	Reduced incidents of domestic violence	Yes	Reduced health and criminal justice costs	NHS, LA, CJS	667	667 supported in the Women's Centre	334	Number of incidents of domestic abuse	100%	All women engage with the Women's Centres services	40%	134 women are retained in the services	40%	54 feel safer from domestic abuse
B9	Reduced incidents of crime (all crimes)	Yes	Reduced police, other criminal justice costs, health costs per actual crime (N.B. Use multipliers to convert from recorded crime or convictions)	Police, CJS, NHS	667	667 supported in the Women's Centre	1400	Number of actual crime incidents	100%	All women engage with the Women's Centres services	80%	214 women are retained in the services	95%	204 do not re-offend
	Reduced statutory	Yes	Reduced costs of temporary housing etc.	LAs	667	667 supported in the Women's Centre	301	Number of women with	100%	All women engage with the Women's Centres services	50%	151 women are retained in the services	55%	84 manage to sustain or find
	Reduced incidences of taking children into care	Yes	Reduced cost of safeguarding	Children's Services	667	667 supported in the Women's Centre	121	401 women with 121 children in looked after care	100%	All women engage with the Women's Centres services	40%	161 women are retained in the services	55%	27 children leave residential or foster care
	Reduced drug	Yes	Reduced health and criminal justice costs	NHS, Police, CJS	667	667 supported in the Women's Centre	134	Number of women with drug dependency issues	100%	All women engage with the Women's Centres services	65%	88 women are retained in the services	40%	36 women stop taking drugs
	Reduced alcohol	Yes	Reduced health and criminal justice costs	NHS, Police, CJS	667	667 supported in the Women's Centre	134	Number of women with alcohol dependency issues	100%	All women engage with the Women's Centres services	65%	88 women are retained in the services	50%	44 abstain from alcohol
S1	Improved well-being of individuals	Yes	Increased confidence / self-esteem	Individual	667	667 supported in the Women's Centre	501	Number of women with confidence/self-esteem issues	100%	All women engage with the Women's Centres services	45%	226 women are retained in the services	60%	136 women improve their confidence/self-esteem outcomes
S4		Yes	Emotional well-being	Individual	667	667 supported in the Women's Centre	467	Number of women with wellbeing issues	100%	All women engage with the Women's Centres services	45%	211 women were retained in the services	60%	127 improve their wellbeing outcomes

%	% deadweight notes / assumptions	Unit fiscal benefit (£)	Unit public value (fiscal) benefit (£)	Unit public value	Unit public value (social) benefit (£)	Unit public value (total) benefit (£)		GDP deflator	Unit cost notes / assumptions	Fiscal benefit	Public value benefit
38%	Calculated as the percentage improvement in the outcomes achieved as a result of the programme multiplied by a ratio of the percentage of women in the population who do not re-offend (81%) over the percentage of women in the Women' Centres who do not re-offend (95%)	£12,657	£,733	£,7420		£9,153	2017-18	94.533	DWP response to parliamentary questions (HC Deb 6 February 2013, vol 558, col 352W)	£8,257.53	£2,760.24
38%		£2,818	£,611	£4,352		£5,963	2017-18	94.533	DWP modelling (unpublished)	£8,616.97	£5,638.37
38%		£,932	£56	£,548		£0,504	2017-18	94.533	DWP modelling (unpublished)	£3,243.55	£3,450.82
38%		£30	£30	£,841		£,671	2007-08	79.461	"aying the Price - The cost of mental health care in England to 2026"- Kings Fund, 2008	£9,039.85	£07,148.71
34%		£,470	£,470	£,473	£,795	£0,738	2008-09	81.618	Based on Silvia Walby paper "he Cost of Domestic Violence: Up-date 2009"	£4,258.74	£05,461.68
81%	MoJ female proven re-offending rate (19.4%)	£79	£79	£,111	£,407	£,497	2016-17	92.664	The Economic and Social cost of Crime, Second Edition (Home Office 2018)	£65,660.18	£91,740.18
47%	Calculated as the percentage improvement in the outcomes achieved as a result of the programme multiplied by a ratio of the percentage of women in the population who do not re-offend (81%) over the percentage of women in the Women' Centres who do not re-offend (95%)	£,501	£,501			£,501	2010-11	84.314	Research Briefing: Immediate costs to government of loss of home (Shelter 2012)	£5,714.04	£5,714.04
47%		£6,510	£6,510			£6,510	2017-18	94.533	DfE Section 251 data; DfE 901 return data	£31,461.44	£31,461.44
34%		£,614	£,614	£,954	£,814	£6,382	2013-14	88.741	Estimating the crime reduction benefits of drug treatment and recovery (National Treatment Agency for Substance Misuse, 2012), p.11; and Drug Treatment Outcomes Research Study (DTORS) (Home Office, 2009), p.13	£1,282.97	£6,474.17
43%		£,800	£,800		£,398	£,198	2009-10	82.774	NICE Clinical Practice Guidance 115	£3,258.51	£3,555.94
51%					£,500	£,500	2009-10	82.774	Bespoke analysis carried out by New Economy Manchester. Based on apportioning the willingness to pay value for the QALY impact of depression (£5,400 per annum) across all the domains of wellbeing as set out in the National Accounts of Wellbeing	£	£5,795.93
51%				£,500	£,500	2009-10	82.774		£	£9,973.45	




'In bloom'

This represents acceptance and allowing yourself to see the beauty of who you are. By Pavia, a member of Women4Change

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