

Improving collaboration between police forces and women's centres: an evidence and practice briefing

Introduction

Women's centres can be an important resource for police forces aiming to improve how they support justice-involved women. They offer a trauma-informed, gender-responsive, holistic model of support which is difficult, if not impossible, for statutory agencies to reproduce. Their beneficial impact on women facing multiple disadvantage and their cost-savings for the system are well understood.¹ Despite this, collaboration between women's centres and police forces can be challenging. Clashing cultures, expectations and approaches to working with women frequently act as barriers to effective partnership working.

This briefing draws on real-world examples to explore how partnerships between police and women's centres can work in practice and how to overcome the challenges to such partnerships. It is based on interviews with practitioners from police forces and women's centres, a collaborative workshop with practitioners from both sectors, and a light-touch evidence review.

Context

Women in the Justice System

The 2007 Corston Report, the first major review to articulate the need for women-specific criminal justice responses, concluded that "women have been marginalised within a system largely designed by men for men."² Nearly two decades on, criminal justice systems still struggle to take account of women's distinct needs and circumstances. In 2025, the government established the Women's Justice Board to address this failure. The board is charged with addressing the distinct needs of women in the criminal justice system and reducing the number of women in prison. Among the board's initial priorities is supporting work to divert women away from the criminal justice system where appropriate, meaning that policing is a key focus.

Women's Lack of Trust in Police

Recent high-profile cases of murder, sexual violence, and misconduct against women by police officers, as well as official reports around institutional misogyny in policing, have contributed to a historic decline in women's trust in the police. The Casey Review found the Metropolitan Police to be institutionally misogynistic and discriminatory, highlighting a pervasive "boys' club" culture and mistreatment of women.³ Similarly, the Baird Inquiry into Greater Manchester Police documented unlawful and unnecessary arrests of women, including domestic abuse victims being criminalised after seeking help. Women quoted in the inquiry reported degrading treatment such as inappropriate strip searches and being denied sanitary products⁴. This mistreatment, and the resulting lack of trust, presents a major barrier to collaboration between police forces and women's centres.

Women's Centres

Women's centres are community-based services which are explicitly designed for women facing multiple disadvantages – a common characteristic of women who come into contact with the justice system. Their approach aligns with international standards, including the United Nations definition of women's empowerment.⁵ The key principles underpinning women's centres include:

- Gender-responsive and trauma-informed practice, including attentiveness to power, inequality, safety, trust, collaboration, and skill-building.

- Relationship-based, non-judgemental support, centred on what women identify as their priorities rather than prescriptive interventions.
- Women-only provision, providing physical and emotional safety for service users.
- Holistic, multi-agency working, tailored to the women's lives and their needs.
- Co-production and peer support, ensuring that women help shape the services they use.

Evidence suggests that women's centres deliver substantial social and economic value by reducing long-term and crisis-point demand on services, including health, housing and domestic abuse support. Analysis by Alma Economics suggests that a hypothetical centre receiving £1 million of investment could support more than 650 women per year, generating an estimated £2.75 million in socio-economic benefits, including savings to public services and improved wellbeing for women and their children.⁶ Numerous evaluations also highlight the positive outcomes associated with women's centres, including improved safety, well-being, housing stability, and reduced reoffending.⁷

How are police and women's centres working together?

The practitioners that we spoke to identified three key models for collaboration between police and women's centres.

Women's centre support as part of an out-of-court resolution

The most common form of collaboration that practitioners told us about was through mandatory referral to women's centre support via a police-issued out-of-court resolution. Depending on the geographical area, this could either be within a diversion scheme or a formal conditional caution. In either case, the expectation attached to the referral is typically limited to one or two initial attendances at the women's centre, with any further engagement offered on a voluntary basis.

This model was described as an effective route into accessing the full range of women's centre support. While women's centres have often been incorporated into community sentences, offering referrals to women eligible for an out-of-court resolution moves the point of engagement earlier, potentially addressing issues before they become further entrenched.

However, practitioners emphasised the importance of keeping any mandatory element light-touch and time-limited to avoid support being imposed where it is not wanted, and to maintain trust in the women's centre model. It is important that women's centres are not placed in a position where they are required to disproportionately monitor attendance or report back to the police, as this risks undermining their independence and the relational, trauma-informed approach that underpins their work.

Supporting women who are arrested

In some areas, women's centre staff are working within police stations, meeting with women while they are in police custody. This is often conceived as a complement to existing all-gender liaison and diversion support, offering referrals into gender-specific women's centre support. Practitioners highlighted that making connections with women at this point is a powerful tool to encourage them to take up the offer of services later.

As well as providing access to services, the support from women's centre staff was also seen as improving women's experiences while in police custody and helping them navigate criminal justice processes. Having workers from women's centres in custody suites was said to aid communication, encourage disclosure, and ensure that women's needs were recognised. Some practitioners also suggested that having women's centre staff co-located in police stations had an indirect benefit in raising awareness of women's needs and the importance of gender-sensitive and trauma-informed working.

Support outside of justice system contact

We also identified areas where police and women's centres were working together – often in partnership with other agencies – to offer outreach services to women outside of the context of criminal justice involvement. One area, for example, had created joint street patrols, which involved police and women's centre caseworkers delivering street outreach services together, offering practical support and referrals into services to women who might not otherwise access them such as women involved in sex work. Another area holds monthly multi-agency 'vulnerability meetings'. These bring together all agencies (probation, police, housing, drug & alcohol, women's centres) to discuss specific women identified as being at risk and put in place support to mitigate that risk.

Barriers to collaboration

Cultural challenges

Several practitioners that we spoke to told us that, despite significant progress, enduring cultural barriers within police forces can significantly hinder collaboration. In particular, some highlighted limited recognition among certain police staff of the distinctive issues facing women in the justice system, and the need for gender-specific responses. As a result, some officers were reluctant to refer women to specialist support, and there were instances reported of individuals perceiving women-specific diversion schemes as sexist. One interviewee told us that they had seen custody officers throw away women's centres leaflets left in stations. Related to this is the broader sense that diversion continues to be seen by some officers as a "soft option". Interviewees also noted that cultural tensions can exist on both sides, as some women's centre workers with low levels of trust in the police may adopt defensive or critical stances that can hinder constructive engagement.

Police and women's centres practitioners who had built effective collaborations in the face of cultural challenges identified three key messages which they felt had been effective in building support:

- Emphasising that arrested women are likely to have been victims of crimes such as domestic or sexual abuse which are far more serious than those they are suspected of.
- Recontextualising women's "difficult" or "aggressive" behaviour as responses to trauma.
- Stressing that the ultimate aim of women's centre support is to reduce reoffending by addressing underlying needs.

Some practitioners have noted that making attendance at women's centres compulsory within at out-of-court disposal has the potential to create cultural friction. Women's centres focus on person-led support, which, when sometimes combined with negative perceptions of police, creates a risk that they will be reluctant to report non-engagement. Practitioners described the need for a pragmatic understanding around this issue. For example, one women's centre acknowledged the necessity of reporting non-engagement but waited to do so until they had exhausted all the options they had available for encouraging women to attend, such as repeated follow-up phone calls.

Restrictive eligibility criteria

Practitioners in a number of areas noted that overly restrictive eligibility criteria had made it difficult to generate referrals into support. One practitioner specifically highlighted this issue in relation to a women's diversion scheme they had established. Initially, women had to commit an offence and reside within a single, limited geographic area, resulting in almost no referrals for the first few weeks. After discussions with stakeholders, they expanded the criteria to include women living in neighbouring areas, which made the scheme workable.

In another area, they had originally required that women have three or more identified criminogenic needs before they could be referred into women's centre support. However, this severely restricted

the number of eligible women as potential clients were reluctant to fully disclose their needs to police or liaison and diversion workers. As a result, the area adopted a new policy under which any woman who was arrested became eligible for referral. Practitioners at the women's centre reported that, once a trusted relationship had been established, women frequently disclosed multiple needs that made them well suited to support but which had not been apparent at the point of referral.

Logistical challenges

A number of practical barriers were also identified. The most commonly mentioned issue was delays in the security vetting required for non-police individuals to access custody suites. Getting clearance for women's centre staff was reported to take anywhere from six months to a year. Combined with high staff turnover within women's centres, this could make it impossible for case-workers to be physically present in the cells to speak with women after the point of arrest. Vetting difficulties can also arise because many women's centre workers have a background of lived experience, including prior convictions. When to disclose spent convictions can often be unclear, but a failure to disclose can lead to workers failing vetting entirely.

Practical advice for managing vetting processes

Before beginning vetting, women's centres should offer clear advice to staff on what should be disclosed, highlighting that even spent convictions may be flagged in the process.

While vetting is ongoing, women's centres may, with police agreement, choose to undertake their own organisational risk assessment to enable an individual to begin work. This approach mirrors established practice in some police staff contexts, where leaders can authorise a risk assessment and put appropriate safeguards in place to allow an individual to start in an enhanced role pending completion of vetting.

Where vetting processes do identify an issue, women's centres or their police contacts can write to their local force vetting unit and seek clarity or appeal. Each disclosure is done on a case-by-case basis and police should be able to take a pragmatic view on whether an undisclosed historic offence reflects a real ongoing risk.

Staff awareness can also be a challenge, particularly where a broad set of officers might need to liaise with the women's centre. In one example, training around the women's centre's role was limited to officers in the specific geographical areas where the partnership would be operating. This meant that when staff were pulled in from neighbouring areas to cover shifts, they were often unaware of the partnership arrangements. Ongoing awareness raising of partnerships across the wider force was seen as key to overcoming this.

While women's centres were regarded as effective for the women that they can reach, practitioners noted the importance of being mindful of the capacity of women's centres – which are often small, underfunded and geographically specific – to deliver interventions with a broad geographical reach. One force which served a rural area had moved away from contracting a women's centre to take referrals from diversion. They had found that because the women's centre only offered services in one town, women were being asked to travel long distances to attend appointments or that significant staff time was being absorbed in travel, reducing the level of support available. This force had moved to supporting women receiving out-of-court resolutions through the same service as men, though with specific adaptations such as the guarantee of a same-gender key worker if desired.

Funding and Commissioning

Sustainable funding remains a fundamental challenge for women's centres. Many rely on short-term, annually renewed contracts, making it difficult to retain experienced staff. This instability can undermine service quality and makes long-term partnership development difficult. Interviewees emphasised that without more secure funding streams, improvements in collaboration risk being undermined by organisational uncertainty.

In some areas, Mayoral Offices or Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) were providing direct funding to women's centres as part of the partnership arrangement. This ensures that centres always have capacity for referred women and should be the default model if police are asking community services to take a significant number of referrals or to dedicate staff time.

However, direct funding may not always be possible, and we did hear examples of resourceful uses of funding streams to help mitigate this. One police force facilitated the establishment of a women's centre by helping them apply to a community fund which had been set up by a private developer working in the area. While this is a very specific local opportunity, the broader point is important: that by supporting women's centres' access to funding, police can ensure the stability of a key resource.

Building Effective Collaboration

Practitioners described several strategies that had helped them overcome barriers to build effective partnerships. The first was having open communication about capabilities, boundaries and role expectations from the start of the working relationship. This enabled the different agencies involved to understand the strengths and limitations of their partners and avoided incorrect expectations.

Another common theme was an emphasis on building interpersonal relationships, which supported the development of trust between people in different agencies. One example was having police officers visit women's centres to fully understand their work. Practitioners also mentioned the usefulness of having dedicated police leads acting as single points of contact for women's centres.

Practitioners further highlighted the importance of working together to resolve difficulties at the first opportunity. In one area, there were disagreements on how to approach compliance monitoring - police had asked women's centre practitioners to provide formal written evidence when a woman was in breach of conditions by not attending a first appointment. However, women's centre staff felt this would be a breach of trust by the women they support and feared being asked to come to court to testify about the breach. Ultimately, after a successful dialogue, a compromise was reached whereby the women's centre could informally notify police about non-attendance but were assured that they wouldn't be asked to formally testify.

Another example was a case where a women's centre was not receiving sufficient information about the women being referred to them as police were not collecting it appropriately at the point of discharge. The pre-existing relationship gave the women's centre the confidence to request improvements in practice and meant police knew that the issue must be significant for the service to raise it.

Focusing on common ground was also identified as a critical factor for resolving tensions between partners. One interviewee told us about tensions following an increase in women being arrested for assault on an emergency worker. The women's centre staff were concerned about what they saw as unnecessary arrests while police saw it as a proportionate response to risks their officers were facing. However, after discussion, both partners agreed that it was in their interests to understand why this increase is taking place and how situations could be de-escalated. In examples like this, partners who identify the overlaps between their different goals can maintain partnerships in the face of tension.

Conclusion

Collaboration between police forces and women's centres offers an important tool to improve outcomes. Women's centres bring specialist, trauma-informed, gender-responsive expertise. By working alongside these services through co-location, out-of-court resolutions, or wider multi-agency arrangements, police can help ensure that women receive timely, holistic support that addresses both immediate needs and the underlying drivers of offending.

However, our conversations with practitioners illustrates that effective collaboration does not happen automatically. Cultural tensions, practical challenges and funding instability can all undermine joint working, even where there is strong commitment on both sides. These challenges are compounded by historically low levels of trust between women and the police, shaped by both personal experiences and high-profile institutional failings. Despite this, the experiences of practitioners show that these barriers are not insurmountable. The practitioners we spoke to offered a number of key strategies:

- Be clear about women's distinctive needs, including the high prevalence of experiences of abuse and victimisation, to build support for gender-responsive approaches amongst police;
- Ensure that women's centre interventions are framed as support rather than punishment. Use mandatory attendance conditions lightly and ensure that they are managed flexibly;
- Keep eligibility criteria for women's centres support broad to maximise the number of referrals;
- Develop strong relationships between police and women's centres which are built on transparent communication, aligned goals and personal connections;
- Take pragmatic and flexible approaches to vetting women's centre staff to facilitate co-location;
- Leverage the resources and influence of the police to ensure that women's centres have sustainable funding to enable long-term partnership working.

When police and women's centres can find alignment between their differing goals, they can build partnerships which transform women's experiences at the point of arrest, improve engagement with support, and contribute to safer outcomes for individuals and communities.

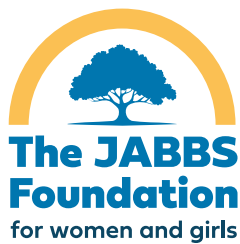
Endnotes

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