



DOES LEEDS NEED A WOMEN'S CENTRE?

Feasibility Study - Executive Summary

Prepared by
Urban Catalysts

March 2024



UK Government

**LEVELLING
UP**

West
Yorkshire
Combined
Authority



Tracy Brabin
Mayor
of West Yorkshire

Executive Summary

In October 2023 the Women and Girls Alliance Leeds (WGAL) commissioned a feasibility study into whether Leeds wants and needs a women's centre. This has been funded from the the Leeds allocation of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) for the Women and Girls Outreach Programme.

Over the next five months the team from Urban Catalysts engaged with over 750 women and a number of male allies to ask those questions and whether, if there was a need and desire to set up a centre, what it might be used for. The team also explored a number of alternatives as they arose during the process.

Need for a Women's Centre

Across all engagement methods, around four fifths of participants responded YES!

Leeds wants and needs a women's centre. There was a dominant feeling of enthusiasm, energy and goodwill to see a new centre for women developed in the city, with lots of ideas & excitement as to what might take place within it, exemplified by this quote from one focus group participant:

'I'm not a community person - but being able to dream about this is delightful.'



However, there was also a smaller, yet significant, number of participants who were either unsure or adamant that a women's centre isn't what Leeds wants or needs at the moment.

This was for a whole range of reasons, including the need for women to have better access to existing services and other suggestions for new developments seen to be more of a priority.

Inclusion

Feedback in interviews, workshops & via an online survey highlighted that there are significant challenges around making a centre inclusive for all women - and that a centre might (unintentionally) reinforce division rather than aid cohesion. There are complexities around inclusion, most notably trans inclusion, & questions raised around how a centre could be accessible & safe for the many, not the few.

Location

Within each engagement method there were some differences of opinion as to where a centre should be located. However, the approximation of two thirds in favour of a city centre location broadly stands across each engagement method, whilst acknowledging the barriers to accessing a central venue for some women. Weekend afternoons were the most popular time to access a centre (with some variation across age). Others favour working with existing community centres to have pop-up women-only sessions. Still others support a combination of the two - what was referred to as a 'hub and spoke model'.

Purpose

As we have gone about the data gathering process, there are **three things** that have really been impressed on us that women in the city need:

1. Women want to feel safer
2. Women need a place(s) where they can be themselves, experience community & feel belonging (this looks different for different women)
3. Women need access to quality services that meet their real & varied needs, including better access to existing services; women repeatedly told us that they need to have better access to existing services rather than providing new ones.

A centre is not the inevitable response to meeting these needs. There are other ways that have been identified that would also be valid responses, for example by:

- Focusing on resourcing existing, & developing new, safety initiatives that have been particularly successful, such as the Women's Nightsafe space
- Improving access to information regarding existing services so that, at any place a woman routinely goes (eg GP, school, pharmacy, library etc) there is the potential for someone to provide information & potentially support on how to access these existing services
- Using existing community centres to offer localised women-only spaces across the city

If a city centre location was the option that the Alliance decides to take forward then there was significant support for this being:

- A beacon for women of Leeds, a place where women could join in activities and/or meet other women informally
- A central hub where women could find out information about services - and potentially receive services

Pilot options

Based on our findings we have outlined ten options which could be piloted in detail, which offer both ways to trial a centre & other alternatives that have surfaced. Depending on resource & capacity (both to lead & deliver the pilot) options are not mutually exclusive, but could be run concurrently:

- A Self-managed space with on-line booking system** - space available for groups of women book & use at times that are convenient to them
- B Regular hosted drop-in space** - somewhere women can drop into for information, a chat, connection, sign-posting, sense of community; some health & wellbeing groups might also take place at the same time
- C Pop ups in local communities** - disseminate findings to existing community organisations & encourage/support provision in response
- D Conference/workshops/arts/cultural events** - disseminate findings to raise awareness that there is demand for this and encourage a range of organisations to deliver
- E Training for organisations on issues that affect women and/or influence services for women in Leeds** - Offer training & build capacity of organisations to understand & better respond to issues affecting women, both in their own workforce & more widely
- F Increasing resources & promoting access to existing counselling & therapy services**
- G Small business support & networking** - potential for an incubator space at community centre, training and skills development (women only), networking opportunities
- H Pilot single directory for women's services across Leeds** - a single spreadsheet of data, which shared with all WGAL members and associated organisations/sectors
- I Increase access to women only fitness classes, sporting opportunities & gym facilities** - raise awareness amongst local providers to provide more women-only gym, fitness and swimming sessions (with women-only staffing) as a business opportunity
- J Pop up access to services** (eg sexual health checks, benefits advice) and activities (celebratory, music, about being together) in spaces across the city, including the city centre (perhaps using existing community spaces or a bus - similar to the mobile library), in order to develop further research building on the feasibility study to build an evidence base for future fundraising

The future/ next steps

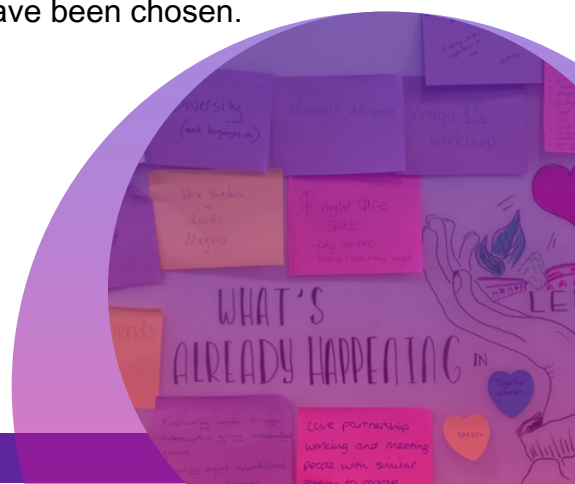
For the longer term, it is important to recognise that, if a new centre is developed, it must not duplicate but rather sit alongside the suite of existing centres in the city, some of which are run by WGAL member organisations & others by other groups. Similarly, it must not compete with existing services & provision for (scarce) funding.

The fact that the city centre is being re-developed provides significant opportunities for women to influence what comes next and to lobby for the inclusion of women's space. And we know that a lot can be achieved with little funding. The proposition that innovation often happens in times of scarcity means that ambitions for something being achieved should not be squashed by the funding landscape. The suggestion to start small, prototype and build trust by delivering results in order to build a robust, collective business case for what WGAL can achieve by working together seems a sensible way forward.

The next stage of the feasibility study is to pilot an initiative, to further test whether a women's centre is what Leeds wants & needs right now. We recommend the detailed findings & analysis provided in the report are read in full before a decision is made as to which option to pilot. Whatever option(s) is chosen, careful consideration needs to be given to various issues in order to ensure that this first step is managed well & builds trust. These issues include (but are not limited to):

- Who leads the initiative, given the lack of capacity within Women Friendly Leeds to spearhead the initiative & the suggestion that minoritised women should be at the centre of whatever comes next
- Robust, transparent decision-making around prioritising, as not everything can be done at once (or at all)
- Inclusion (including trans inclusion - there were strong views expressed on both sides of this debate)
- Prioritising safety & access along with inclusion as the three central pillars on which any response is designed & developed

Drawing on existing good practice, both within Leeds & from further afield, is imperative. A pilot initiative will lay important foundations for any further developments & therefore paying careful attention to these issues at this early stage is critical. This includes clear, careful communications about the next steps & why these have been chosen.

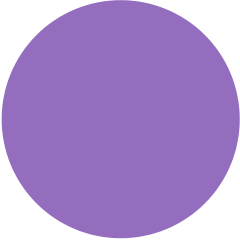
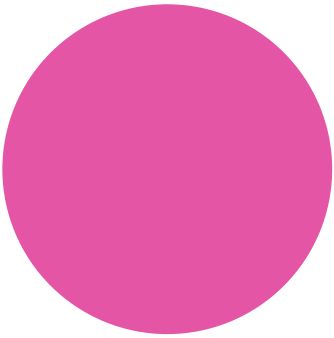


Our recommendations for WGAL include for them to:

- 1 Use the information within this feasibility study to make an informed decision about what and how to pilot;
- 2 Give serious consideration to where the leadership to the next phase will come from, developing a robust steering group which has the capacity and confidence to deliver;
- 3 Secure additional resources to ensure that any steering group is adequately resourced;
- 4 Highlight any gaps in knowledge and information that has been gathered through this feasibility study and decide if those gaps need to be filled either before the next pilot phase or as part of the next pilot phase;
- 5 Consider how information about women's services in Leeds can be better promoted;
- 6 Develop a variety of communication collateral that provides tailored information contained within this report to inform particular audiences.

'A women's centre is a missing link in a city this size. A place of connection, play, making and creating, along with advice and exercise is desperately needed and will be very well subscribed. We know of the difficulty in carving out a safe and nourishing thriving space for women to be. This will be a very progressive move for Leeds as a city and I know there are bands of women raring to go.'





About the team

This work was undertaken by a team of independent practitioners:

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