



DOES LEEDS NEED A WOMEN'S CENTRE?

Feasibility Study

Prepared by
Urban Catalysts

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UK Government

**LEVELLING
UP**

**West
Yorkshire**
Combined
Authority



**Tracy Brabin
Mayor**
of West Yorkshire

Contents



01	Executive Summary	1
02	Introduction	6
03	Our approach	8
04	Background	10
05	Analysis	18
06	Detailed Findings	28
	a Interviews	
	b Focus groups	
	c Public workshops	
	d Survey	
07	Options	57
08	Design workshop with WGAL leaders	68
09	Recommendations	71
10	End notes	73
11	Appendices	75

1. Executive Summary

In October 2023 the Women and Girls Alliance Leeds (WGAL) commissioned a feasibility study¹ 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:

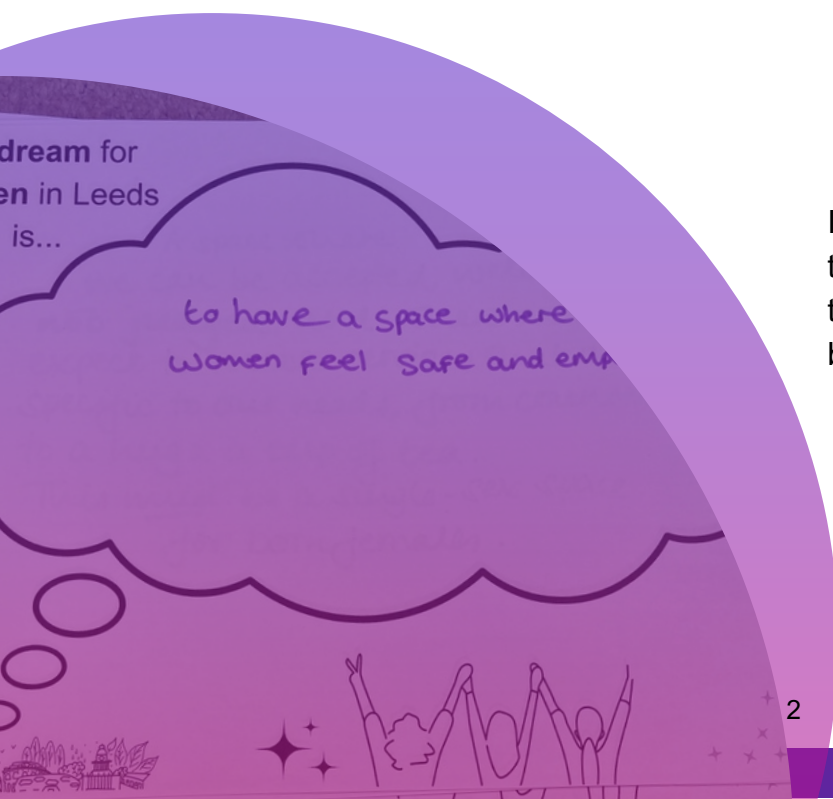
1. Women want to feel safer
2. Women need a place(s) where they can be themselves, experience community & feel belonging (this looks different for different women)
3. Women need access to quality services that meet their real & varied needs, including better access to existing services. Women repeatedly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

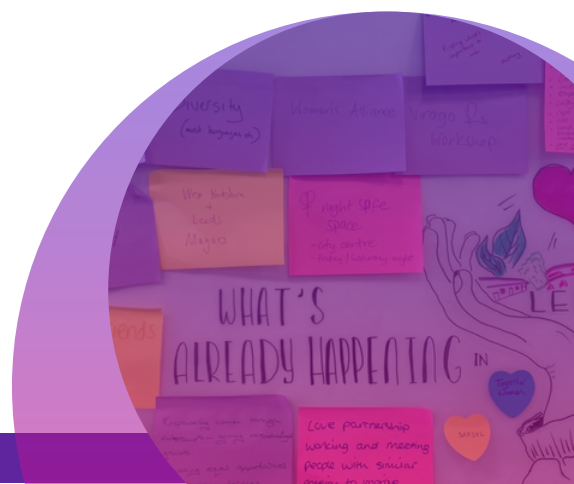
For the longer term, it is important to recognise that, if a new centre is developed, it must not duplicate but rather sit alongside the suite of existing centres in the city, some of which are run by WGAL member organisations & others by other groups. Similarly, it must not compete with existing services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



2. Introduction

Structure of the report

This report begins by looking at the background to why WGAL commissioned the feasibility study and the wider context of: making Leeds a better place for women; the UK women's voluntary sector; financial sustainability.

We then provide an analysis section, covering all the questions provided in the original brief, followed by possible options to pilot in the second phase of the feasibility study. Each option offers guidance as to where the proposal originated, along with information to assist decision making.

The detailed findings section then follows, which collates the information gathered through 1-2-1 interviews, focus groups, workshops and an online survey. We have also drawn on information from other sources.

Finally we provide our recommendations for next steps.

Why did WGAL commission this work?

Despite Leeds being one of the largest cities in the UK, it does not have a dedicated general purpose women's centre, unlike many other towns & cities.²

Whilst women account for 51%³ of the population of Leeds there is currently no single local or regional strategic system which supports or has responsibility for women or families, especially those with complex needs.

Local government, health, criminal justice, employment, skills and benefits agencies each have their own systems of strategic planning and commissioning driven by separate, often nationally mandated, performance targets and governance arrangements; we have heard from various sources that there is a lack of integrated thinking or action. In fact, some systems are so complex that the relatively new role - that of Care Navigator - has had to be created just to help people access the services they need!

There have been conversations for many years about whether there is a need and/or a desire for a women's centre in the city. There has been a desire to explore creating a collaborative space, to bring women together from across communities and to create a sense of a women's community in Leeds. A space for women and girls to come together from across the city to learn about each other's lives and to work towards creating social justice.



In recent times these conversations have again resurfaced, within the context of WGAL, as the absence of a women's centre has been mooted as a factor undermining the delivery of services to women and girls in Leeds. Enabled by funding from the Leeds allocation of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) for the Women and Girls Outreach Programme, WGAL commissioned a feasibility study to take their inquiry to the wider community.

WGAL is an alliance of 12 organisations that each provide particular support services for women and girls across Leeds. One of the aims of WGAL is to work with women and girls across the city to support their peers and influence service delivery, development and design across Leeds. They do this by supporting the leadership within WGAL to work together to develop the external influence of member organisations and by collectively sitting on a number of local and national panels to ensure the voices of women of Leeds inform policy and decision making in local bodies in the city and beyond.

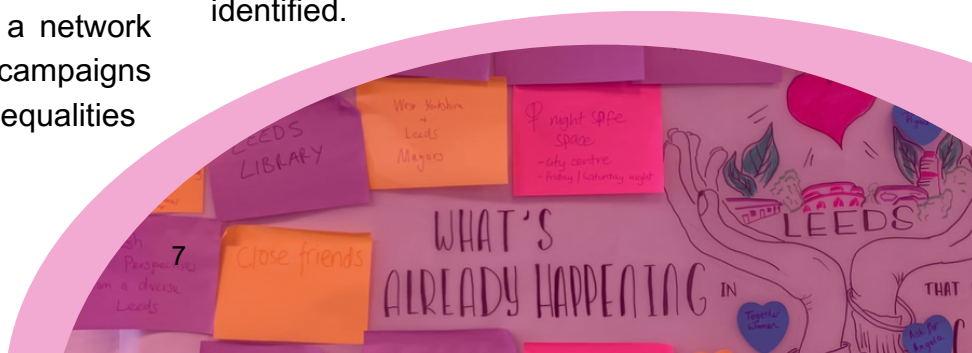
This feasibility study has been overseen by The Women Friendly Leeds⁴ (WFL) movement, which was established in 2019 to provide strategic leadership on women's issues. The WFL mission is to: mobilise women and girls to have their voices heard; ensure that their needs are considered in all decision making; and empower them to lead safer, healthier, equal and more fulfilled lives. Since inception they have developed a network of ambassadors & allies, lead campaigns focusing on safety & women's inequalities

& run various hubs for women & girls to increase their voice & influence. Working in partnership they have pioneered various safety initiatives, including Leeds' Women's Nightsafe Space & promotion of Ask Angela.

The study was undertaken with the awareness that there might not be a need for a new women's centre; that existing members of WGAL might be able to expand their services to meet new need; that there might be a role for pop-up and/or virtual women's centre spaces; that mainstream organisations might create women-only spaces within their buildings; that there may be other needs that are more pressing in the lives of women & girls in the city. There was an understanding that, if there was a need, then it might be met by a physical space, or a virtual space.

There was acknowledgement of the challenge of managing expectations during the process, recognising that creating space to explore dreams & visions about what could be can lead to expectations that may be undeliverable. That has sought to be mitigated by clear communication about the process & seeking not to raise expectations.

This feasibility study is the first phase of a consultation and engagement process. The second phase will use the information gathered during this piece of work to inform the delivery of a pilot during 2024-25, to further test & learn what might work well in response to needs & opportunities identified.



3. Our approach

The project team

To deliver this feasibility study we brought together a project team of six women to work as a collective under the banner of Urban Catalysts⁵. We are all Leeds-based and work freelance, have extensive local networks, and bring a diversity of skills and lived experience.



Our methodology

Building on our own lived experience of being women living in Leeds, our knowledge of service delivery, and an understanding of the challenges and issues faced by charities in the development and sustainability of services we decided that the best approach was to use Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as the underpinning ethos and framework. We focused on the particular place of Leeds and looked for what already exists, what is working well and how that can be built upon. Following the four stages of an AI process we sought to:

DISCOVER	what is already taking place & working well
DREAM	what could be different and what is possible
DESIGN	what this could look like in practice
DELIVER	a response to the findings (initially this report, then through the next pilot stage of the feasibility study & longer term)

Over the past five months we have gathered information via the following sources:

- 51 **semi-structured interviews and conversations** with (mostly) women leaders in the city across all three sectors & women running centres in other parts of the UK
- Nine **Focus Groups** plus informal conversations at two social groups (LGBTQ+ community & Black British, African & Caribbean women)
- **Online survey** - received 601 responses (only seven respondents identified as male)





4. Background



The majority of women's centres in the UK have been set up to provide high quality support to women and families who have often been failed by mainstream services. They are often run by local women for local women.

Women's Centres first started appearing in the 1970s to provide a local base for campaigning, consciousness raising and to deliver support services such as incest survivor groups and rape crisis helplines. A number have operated continuously ever since, while others have been established more recently. There are currently around 50 such centres in England and Wales with a strong focus on providing support for the most disadvantaged women in their communities. Their work continues to be underpinned by a commitment to addressing gender discrimination and all forms of inequality. Whilst there are organisations which offer some coordination & support to some centres, such as the Labyrinth Project run by Solace Women's Aid,⁶ there is no single overarching organisation or role which provides support across the whole of the national women's sector, nor that undertakes research on the work it is doing, nor has a comprehensive list of the organisations which form part of this sector.

Women's centres may offer a range of services, including counselling, education, job training, legal assistance, and health care. A women's centre is often a community-based organisation that provides support, resources and services to women in need.

These centres are often focused on empowering women and promoting gender equality. 'Women's Centres provide information, advice, support and training or education in safe, women-only spaces. Many women accessing Women's Centres face multiple challenges and their work therefore covers a wide range of issues such as health, violence and abuse, employment, education, rights, and criminal justice issues. Services and activities provided by Women's Centres vary according to the needs of their community, but often include:

- One to one holistic support
- Drug and alcohol support
- Counselling and psychotherapy
- Domestic abuse programmes
- Group work
- Courses and workshops
- Drop in sessions
- Sign-posting to other services / sources of support'⁷

The publication of the Corston Report⁸ in 2007 was a turning point for many centres. The report made 43 recommendations about the treatment of women in the criminal justice system, and argued for 'the need for a distinct, radically different, visibly-led, strategic, proportionate, holistic, women-centred approach'. It presented a vivid picture of women's prisons filled with women who had themselves been the victims of childhood trauma, had poor levels of education and employment, and who had experienced domestic violence, substance misuse and mental health.

The report identified that too many women received short prison sentences - long enough to derail their lives but too short to provide any sort of meaningful rehabilitation support. Following publication of the report there was government funding and support for the development of a network of women's centres that also included:

- advice about housing
- advice about money and debt
- management counselling

As a result, many women's centres have become synonymous with offering specialist community-based support services for women facing multiple disadvantage, including women in, or at risk of involvement in, the criminal justice system.

However, whilst a report from the UK Women's budget groups (2020) highlighted the cost savings made by investing in women's centres - the investment gap between what is required and what is provided by local and central government is huge.

A space for self determination

There are other examples of women's centres⁹ - both in the UK and further afield - that provide physical and/or digital community space open to anyone for whom woman is a meaningful identifier or lived experience. They offer a safe space for learning, emotional support, empathy and empowerment through self-determination and a sense of community. There is a general ambition to create a sense of community that is inclusive and actively working towards justice for women of colour, LGBTQ+ women, those with disabilities and/or experiencing mental health difficulties.

'Safety, both physical and emotional, is a key benefit of women-only services. As a result, women feel supported and comfortable. They become empowered and develop confidence, greater independence and higher self-esteem. They are less marginalised and isolated and feel more able to express themselves. Women using these services feel that their voices are heard and listened to. Through sharing their experiences with other women to make sense of the world together, they develop a sense of solidarity.'

Women's Resource Centre, 2011



Some are able to provide spaces for community and collaboration, being present in their communities with the intention of sharing their mission, connecting with new individuals, spreading awareness of local issues, and advocating for social justice. In the spirit of community development, they hope that others will join in and become more aware of the issues women are up against and join with others to find solidarity.

A snapshot of the current women's sector and services in Leeds

We heard about the high levels of crisis being experienced by women in Leeds, where there are long waiting lists in some services & a lack of resources to meet the need. We heard that there is a need to 'increase investment for those who are least heard but seen by many services, to reduce the health inequality gap for those women, who deserve it, & are costing the system a disproportionate amount of money & the system isn't serving them.' The need for much more early intervention & longer term support for women & girls was highlighted, including earlier intervention for 'at-risk' girls, because the threshold to access social services is so high. Lack of access to single sex emergency accommodation for young vulnerable women in crisis was highlighted as a significant gap in current provision by several organisations. We heard about the need for out of hours provision, for more support for care leavers & about a lack of coordination of strategic action & response to women's needs amongst stakeholders involved in Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARAC).

Interviewees described the impact of contracts being reduced in value with the assumption that organisations will be able to absorb the cuts and continue to provide the same service, as well as the pressure on staff both professionally & personally & the lack of career progression for them within the sector & associated challenges with staff retainment.

There was plenty of enthusiasm amongst many interviewees for the development of

a women's centre that enhanced what already exists in the city and - critically - that makes it work better, creating a culture of leadership amongst women in the city.

Community spaces across Leeds

There are a myriad of organisations providing services and support to women across Leeds. They range in size from small self-help/peer-led groups with little or no funding through to organisations with incomes over £3 million with a significant number of staff.

However, in our conversations with WGAL leaders, we heard that their services are overstretched and they could do so much more if they had additional funding. There are also real issues associated with the nature of short-term funding and the stop-start-stop to services - and spaces - that results in a confusion of which services and spaces are currently available.

WGAL member organisations run centres in communities across Leeds. Together Women are based in the city centre & run regular groups & support sessions for vulnerable women, particularly but by no means exclusively those involved in the criminal justice system.

'It would be amazing to have somewhere where women whose behaviours are driven by the trauma they've experienced could go, as well as the next door neighbour going to meet women in the community, taking away the stigma & judgement to make co-benefit.'

'It is a great moment to be exploring it: innovation happens when funding is scarce; whilst the city centre is being reimagined.'

Shantona, Asha & Getaway Girls run centres in local communities focusing on a particular demographic (eg. young women, women from a particular ethnic community). Other WGAL members run particular services in response to specific needs or for particular groups, either from their own building or in spaces throughout the city.

Some of these women's organisations have meeting space, both for 1-2-1 and larger group meetings. However, these spaces are generally associated with that specific organisation and the services they provide.

These spaces are also generally well used by that organisation, with little scope for opening up access for other groups to use.

There are also 26 community hubs and a number of community centres¹⁰ across the city. Some of these are council owned - others are run by third sector organisations. In both instances spaces can be hired - but for a cost. For many smaller organisations and/or informal groups of women wanting to meet locally, this is a barrier.

“

'Our service is overwhelmingly used by women and lots of our groups are exclusively attended by women. Attendance is usually around 10-12 for each group. But we had never advertised our groups as women-only. We also have exclusively men-only groups. However, when we had a women-only event for International Women's Day lots of women who had never engaged in their groups before came along, particularly racially minoritised women. As a result we now do advertise some of our groups as women-only and attendance has increased – as has the diversity of those groups.'

Some women's groups do access mainstream and/or community-specific spaces. Sometimes this works, for example the Women's Survivors Group meets regularly at the Bangladeshi Centre on Roundhay Rd, and feel both welcomed and safe.

But sometimes it doesn't work well:

'A daughter of one of our members used the gym at the local community centre. It was supposed to be a women-only session - but the caretaker was a man. The young woman was the only person using the gym that evening and he came into the space and made a pass at her. None of us use that space any more. It just isn't safe.'

”

Funding & support of the women's sector

The task of mapping the women and girls sector has been made more challenging by widely recognised gaps in the Voluntary Community and Social Enterprises (VCSE) sector data infrastructure - and the fact that there is no one body with oversight of, or that provides support to, the women and girls sector in the UK. There is little research mapping them, or their resources, and they are not explicitly identified in many of the public datasets.¹¹ But it is worth mentioning:

- The Women's Resource Centre: [Women's Resource Centre \(wrc.org.uk\)](http://wrc.org.uk)
- National Women's Justice Coalition: [Welcome to the National Women's Justice Coalition » National Women's Justice Coalition \(wearenwjc.org.uk\)](http://wearenwjc.org.uk) which is hosted by Together Women, a member of WGAL
- Rosa: [Homepage - Rosa \(rosauk.org\)](http://rosauk.org)

In 2020 the Women's Budget Group (WBG), an independent network of leading academic researchers, policy experts and campaigners, published a report *The Case for Sustainable Funding for Women's Centres*.¹² It argues that the services provided by women's centres are at risk of closure for lack of secure funding and makes the case for investing in a sustainable funding model. The report summarised the evidence of the cost of the current system and the savings that are already being realised through the work of women's centres.

It recommended a model of matched funding, in which central and local governments share the costs of delivering the objectives in the Government's Female Offender Strategy. One could argue that funding for health objectives could also contribute to this work. As yet, these recommendations have fallen on unresponsive government officials: 'These organisations are critical to the lives of individual women and girls, to communities and to the fabric of our society and yet much of what they do is undervalued, under-resourced and ultimately unsustainable.'¹³

Information from 360Giving notes that 55,500 grants awarded to the women's sector in 2021 were recorded on the portal¹⁴ with a total worth £4.1 billion. However, research in 2020 looking at funding of the women's sector in London evidenced that only 2.94% of all charitable funding is secured by the women's sector. Furthermore, research published in 2023 noted that over 33% of funding of services for women and girls went to mainstream organisations, and that over half of grants going to women and girls organisations are for less than £10k.¹⁶ We have been unable to locate any specific data on funding specifically for organisations working with racially minoritised women and girls.

In our review of nine UK women's centres, the largest and most consistent funders reported have included:

- The National Lottery
- The Ministry of Justice
- Health Authorities

Some women's centres also receive funds from local community foundations and national charitable foundations (e.g. Henry Smith Charity, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, Lloyds Bank Foundation, amongst others).¹⁷

As part of our desk research we had contact with Leeds Community Foundation. They corroborate these perspectives that funding for women & girls 'nationally is underrepresented in grant funding'. They also said that don't tend to have funds that can be used for this kind of purpose, except perhaps wraparound core costs for the organisations taking part in the development to enable it to happen'. So that funding for capacity to engage may be useful for WGAL organisations to engage, but does not provide hope regarding Leeds-based grant funding for any proposed centre development.

We have developed a target funding list applicable to a range of social action/welfare activities.¹⁸ Further work would be required, including breaking down into specific project related activities for smaller applications according to funder priorities and intended outcomes. Given the potentially broad nature of any initiative that might be developed following on from this feasibility study & subsequent pilot, a more detailed delivery plan and budget would be required to identify potential 'strategic start up' funds rather than operational project costs.



"A women's centre could be the public – and strategic – face of the women's sector. It could have a leadership role"

*'These organisations are critical to the lives of individual women and girls, to communities and to the fabric of our society and yet much of what they do is undervalued, under-resourced and ultimately unsustainable.'*¹³



Financial Sustainability

Ensuring the financial viability and sustainability of any service is critical. As identified, many women's centres rely on contracts from public sector agencies to deliver critical services. The development of a new women's centre which would be for 'general purpose' with open access would pose a different set of funding challenges.

Organisations that successfully manage multiple-use community space all spoke of the need to develop commercial services such as renting space to other organisations - and the value of having long-term tenants as well as more ad-hoc space rentals for events or training sessions. Some even worked with their tenants to support them in securing additional funding to pay for the use of the space.

In 2009, the Women's Resource Centre (WRC) commissioned a feasibility study (Stage 1)¹⁹ into the viability of building ownership through the creation of a dedicated 'women's centre of excellence' for the women's sector in London. The twin aims of property ownership were to provide a resource for the women's sector whilst making WRC more financially independent.

Given the changes in the funding landscape in 2009/10, the Ethical Property Foundation was commissioned to prepare a second report (Stage 2)²⁰ to investigate the financial viability of a building based on WRC's vision and provide options for taking the project forward.

The challenges identified by The Ethical Property Foundation included:

Challenge 1 - Viability of multi-tenanted women-only space: Stage 2 analysed the vision of the building as a women-only space in terms of its impact on three key areas: property management costs; service and contractor costs; and void periods. This analysis indicated that the strict adherence to a women only centre is likely to increase property management and potentially service costs, whilst also increasing void periods.

Challenge 2 - Sector demand and affordable rents: In order to sustain a mission focussed building there must be a demonstrable demand within the women's sector for the services being offered. The survey information helped to identify tenant demands for the building, whilst also identifying small organisations (5 employees or less) as a key potential tenant group. However, survey results from Stage 1 and Stage 2 indicate there are still some important questions to be answered as to whether there is sufficient demand and capacity within women's sector organisations to sustain a centre at the proposed rent and scale.

Challenge 3 - Investment and financing: Stage 2 considered the alternative forms of financing available to WRC, and concluded that investment or loan finance could only account for a proportion of total purchase price. Therefore significant unrestricted grant funding and donations would be required to bridge this funding shortfall.

We also spoke to two Leeds-based organisations currently looking for premises in the city centre:

Climate Action Leeds team spoke about some of the challenges they have experienced in trying to secure low cost space in central Leeds. Their model has been to find a landlord that has a 'stranded asset' ie. an empty property for which they are still liable for business rates, utilities and insurance. They noted that whilst they had managed to secure an ideal space for 12 months on excellent terms,²¹ they are struggling to now replicate this. Even when a property is offered at a peppercorn or free rent, if they would be expected to pay services changes then this would in all likelihood make a property unaffordable.²²

Pride of Place have been trying to find centrally located space for LGBTQ+ communities, and even with the support of Leeds City Council (LCC) have had a number of unexpected set-backs. They are hoping to move into a pro-bono space in the near future but still need to secure operational costs to deliver any meaningful activity from the space.

Whether WGAL members might be interested in either buying or leasing a building, additional work would be required to demonstrate longer term viability, including:

- Coordinating a demand analysis & property appraisal
- Commissioning a financial assessment
- Developing a solid business case for a building
- Developing a fundraising strategy to help move the project forward

Given that WGAL members and the WFL team have experience of running safe spaces for women in the city there is lots of good practice and experience to draw upon should this be an option which is agreed should be pursued.



5. Analysis



Does Leeds want a women's centre?

The majority of respondents (around four fifths) were positive about wanting a women's centre for Leeds. This included people interviewed, those consulted through focus groups & in workshops, as well as respondents to the online survey. In each engagement method there was a dominant feeling of **enthusiasm, energy & goodwill** to see a new centre for women developed in the city (notwithstanding that several people who were very positive also questioned whether or not it was a financially viable proposition in the current climate).

However, this needs to be balanced with the smaller, yet significant, number of people who were either unsure or asserted that a women's centre isn't what Leeds wants or needs at the moment. This was for a whole range of reasons, a focal one being the challenge of how to **develop an inclusive space without in the process reinforcing or causing further division**, particularly but not exclusively in the area of trans inclusion. We explore this further later on in the section about equitability.

Some services that participants across the study, particularly in the survey & focus groups, highlighted as **what women want are services already on offer in the city**, including amongst WGAL organisations. However some participants reported that waiting lists are too long, which can lead to a lack of ease in being able to access what they need. Other women lack awareness of what services exist and how to access them. A next step in response to this may be for WGAL organisations to collaborate on joint marketing campaigns to increase awareness of what is available. A longer term response would be to consider a system for making information about existing services much more accessible both to professionals & women living in the city. We acknowledge the inherent tension in raising awareness leading to increased demand for services which are already stretched & struggle at times to secure sufficient funding to meet existing demand.

There is lots of support for any centre to:

- be **open access for both individuals and women's community groups** to use on a self-organised basis.
- women-only space where they can **experience community & solidarity**.
- offer better **information & access to services**.
- increase **understanding & responsiveness to the specific needs** associated with being a woman and;
- the opportunity to **influence services about these issues & needs**.

There are many different women-only services & activities, as well as new opportunities not currently available to them, that they would love to access. If a women's centre can deliver this, then there is widespread (but not unanimous) support for this. There is also potential for much of it to be achieved in women-only spaces and/or in a women-only way, but this does not necessarily mean a designated women's centre.



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



If a women's centre can facilitate these, then it is one potential response to meeting the needs of women & girls in the city. It could provide a 'front door' to help women & girls to access existing (& potentially new) services, activities & opportunities and/or it could provide an accessible space in which women could meet, self-organise, connect, learn, share skills, support each other and so on.

A centre is not the inevitable response.

There are other ways that have been identified that could also meet these needs, 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 (e.g. 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

Other needs were highlighted during the course of this study that demand responses that could not be provided by a centre. These include:

- access to single sex emergency accommodation for vulnerable young women
- access to sexual health services (although advice & potentially screening could be accessed through a centre)
- a more coordinated approach around strategic support for the most vulnerable women who've experienced trauma
- better access to mainstream services, particularly around general health and mental health (notwithstanding that a centre could provide advice around these issues)



There was broad agreement that any **new centre that might be established must not duplicate but complement & work alongside the centres, & indeed other provision for women & girls, that already exists in the city.** For the most part these centres each have a unique selling point around a particular geography, demographic or issue/need experienced by users. Unless a multi-purpose centre is established, it is important to recognise that any new centre developed would sit alongside the suite of existing centres in the city.

We have outlined our suggested options to pilot in the second stage of this feasibility study. These options cover a multiplicity of the needs and wants highlighted throughout the engagement methods; they suggest a variety of responses to varying demands (where these were clear) amongst different demographics, particularly racially minoritised women. If the decision is taken not to pilot a bespoke women's centre, then the options include areas for development that pick up on alternative suggestions for influencing areas of the fabric of the city to better meet the needs of its women & girls.

What would be the purpose of the centre?

Throughout the data collection various different potential purposes for a women's centre surfaced, including:

- just **a space to be**: women need and want spaces where they can feel safe, where they can be themselves, where they can meet women like themselves & also women who are different to themselves
- a place where other **information and services for women can be more easily accessed**
- a place where **existing women's organisations could deliver services and potentially co-locate**, or at least all have flexibility to make use of (indeed some indicated this could be across wider Third Sector organisations as well as within the women's sector)
- a place to **support smaller community groups**
- a place where other **services could deliver training and support groups to/for women**
- a place which provides **cohesion for the women's sector in Leeds**, acts as a focal point and has a leadership role - ultimately raising the profile of the women's sector in the city

Whether meeting all these desires and objectives under one roof is a realistic prospect, particularly in the short and medium term, is influenced by many factors. If it is decided that a centre should be developed, following a successful pilot at the second stage of the feasibility, it is highly likely that choices will need to be made as to what services or activities are offered & that in this process of choosing, the needs of some will be prioritised over the needs of others. How the assessment & decision-making around this might take place is explored further in the later section in this analysis on equitability.

Where should it be located?

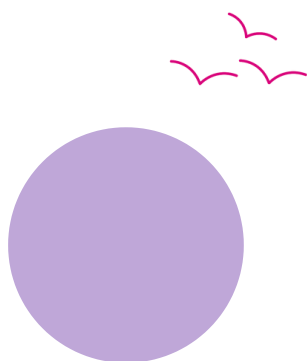
Within each engagement method there were some differences of opinion as to where a centre should be located. However, the approximation of **two thirds in favour of a city centre location** broadly stands across each engagement method. This was cited as the most central, accessible space to women from all communities across the city, whilst appreciating that there are some significant barriers for some women to accessing a centre in the city centre. For some women the city centre is a safe space but for others there were concerns around safety, affordability (both of travel and venues), unhelpful transport drivers and access to childcare, all of which were highlighted across all engagement methods. Nonetheless, if there is only the opportunity to develop one new space, then there was majority support for it being in the city centre.

If there is opportunity for more than one space, then the idea of a **hub and spoke model** was floated by a number of interviewees as well as in workshops, with a city centre base and working with other community centres to increase provision for women-only activities and services right across all the geographies of the city.

Leeds City Centre is currently being re-imagined and redeveloped. Is this a moment of opportunity to re-imagine women's space(s) and to influence some of the city centre development? This might mean working with unlikely allies. Some see the potential for a central beacon/flagship space to highlight and promote the women's sector and the needs of women in Leeds. And whilst WFL do not currently have the capacity to lead on the development of a women's centre, others saw it as an opportunity to raise the profile of the work being done by WFL.

There is learning to be gained from Climate Action Leeds, who managed to secure free premises in the city centre, but only for one year & with a lack of security in that the lease could be withdrawn at a month's notice. Developing the space was a huge investment for a short(ish) period of time. Since September 2023 they have been looking for new premises and it is proving challenging to find somewhere appropriate.

Whilst the perception is that there are many potential vacant spaces in the city centre, in reality gaining access to them at low or no cost is very challenging.



What would be the opening times?



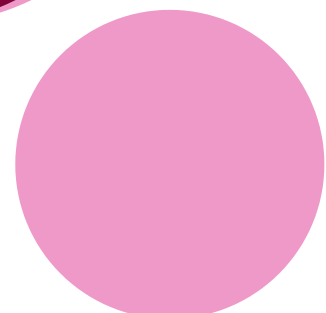
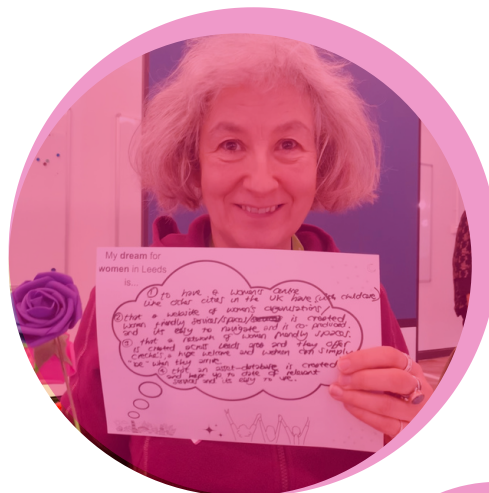
The survey was the main data collection method which provided information on times which women would prefer to access a centre. The **most popular across all respondents was weekend afternoons**. However, it's worth noting the variation according to particular demographics, with:

- **weekday early evenings being most popular with younger women** (aged 18-35) and
- **weekday afternoons being most popular with older women** (aged 66+).

Therefore the time that a centre should open cannot be considered in isolation from the question of what will take place within it and this comes back to whether there is a target demographic & if so, having opening times which most suit their needs. However, if there is a desire to not focus on a particular demographic, then weekend afternoons are the obvious time to trial a central women's space.

Given that 'out of hours' both weekday early evenings and weekends are the most popular times, it does present the potential for an existing space that is used 9am-5pm during the week to be used during times when the building is usually closed. This could make piloting a centre in an existing space more realistic and affordable.

Of course there will be staffing implications around evening and weekend requirements.



What would the internal design include?

Through our process of listening, we came to understand that, whilst the fabric of the building may have been the intention behind this question when it was asked, by far the most important considerations for the design of any building were the aspects of



Safety means different things to different women and paying attention to all the varying needs and ways which can support women to feel safer needs careful consideration in the development of whatever comes next, both in the pilot phase and subsequent developments. Spaces that many of us take for granted are not safe spaces for many women, for varying reasons. WGAL members and WFL have a wealth of experience in running safe & accessible spaces for women and the development of any new space should draw on this experience and good practice as well as learning from other women's spaces across the UK.

Specifically regarding inclusion, we found good practice across the sector. We were particularly keen to enquire about trans inclusion as it had been raised as a contentious subject at each stage of engagement and had been a challenge to host well within the workshop space. Some organisations we spoke to are explicitly trans-inclusive, with open statements on their websites and in their building(s), offering a wholehearted active invitation to trans women to use their services/participate in their space. We discovered that other organisations were more trans-responsive, providing services to trans women as and when required. What was clear across both was the importance of ensuring that staff, trustees and volunteers had adequate training and support around the issues. This took different forms in different services. Our analysis is that some organisations are being trans-inclusive at all cost - whilst others are taking a more risk-management approach, acknowledging that inclusion does not necessarily mean that everyone can access every service - but it does mean that everyone should feel safe.

What we did hear loud and clear in conversation with trans women was that they would need to be explicitly included in order to feel that any centre (or initiative) really meant to include them. So trans inclusion means active clear welcome, otherwise trans women are unlikely to believe a centre is for them & access it.

However, it is important to not only focus on inclusion as being about this single issue. In the design workshop there were many different facets of inclusion (as well as safety & access) that were raised & the overlaps between them identified, all of which provide useful guidance in planning how to design a centre to meet women's needs.

Finally, one thing that came across time and again was that the imagery used in any physical space should be used to explicitly show that women from diverse backgrounds were welcome.



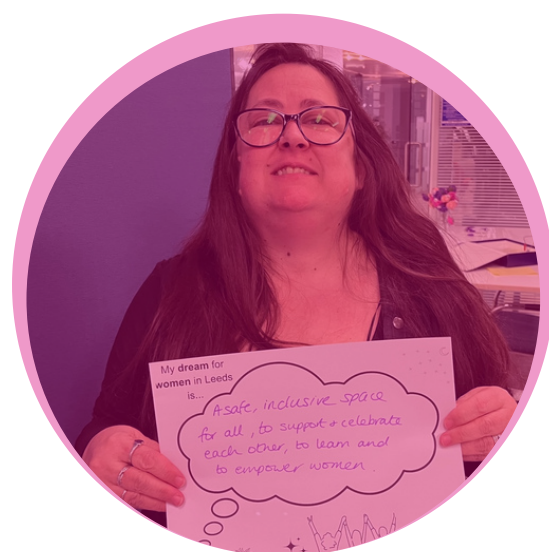
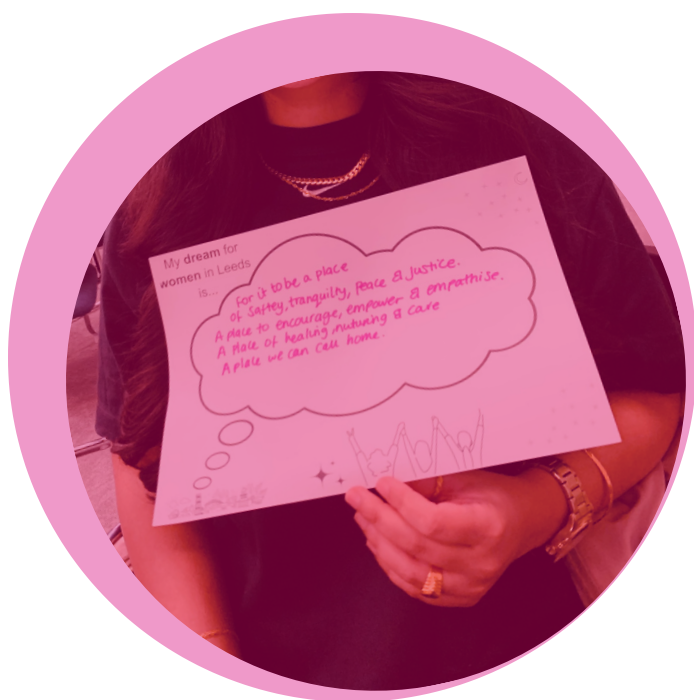
Who would own and how would the centre be managed?

It is clear from the responses that there is a desire that any centre **should not be aligned to any one service** and that there is a desire for any initiative to have its **own identity and branding**.

Any development would likely need to be led by a WGAL member or a newly created entity. When approached directly, both Leeds Women's Aid and WFL have indicated that they do not have the capacity to lead on the development of a women's centre. This was also intimated (although not directly asked) by several of the other WGAL organisational leaders at the design meeting. This leads us to question where the leadership will come from and whether capacity needs to be developed in order to deliver the next stage of the pilot.

In terms of next steps for leadership and management, it feels a bit like a chicken and egg situation: what pilot is chosen is likely to influence the decision around who manages it; at the same time it may be who has desire/capacity to lead and manage will influence what pilot is chosen (for example, if capacity is spacious a different pilot is likely to be selected to if it is severely limited).

There seems to be quite a bit of appetite for **women** to use the service on a self-directed basis, and **to have agency over it**. But as we also heard, there needs to be some caution. Attention needs to be paid to having good robust policies, support for volunteers and staff, appropriate training and so on. Safety needs to be considered at all times with risk being carefully managed and there needs to be transparent accountability. There is a need for leadership from an organisation that brings both skills and robustness.



How this women's centre could be equitable?

The main challenge to achieving equity is how to ensure that any centre is developed to be **safe, inclusive and accessible** for the many and not just the few. This is not just about who uses any centre, but who initiates, leads, governs and makes decisions.

A number of participants considered how one could ensure that the centre was welcoming to racially minoritised women. **Suggestions** included:

- having this work **led by racially minoritised women**
- having the centre be **only for racially minoritised women for the first year**
- having **racially minoritised women on the staff team**
- ensuring that there are images of racially minoritised women on the walls
- and **marketing that includes images of racially minoritised women.**



However, we heard the perspective that too often middle-class, white, abled-bodied, heterosexual women are in leadership positions, trying to make a space or service accessible to marginalised and minoritised women. But to truly make a centre/space accessible to more women means that those women need to lead it. If the leadership is white, able-bodied, heterosexual women, then they will (from good intention) be constantly trying to retro-fit the space/service rather than embedding equity into the DNA.

We heard several voices speak up to **advocate for white women to step aside** and create space for racially minoritised (and other marginalised) women to lead any new development. This will undoubtedly influence what takes place in the second stage of the feasibility & what the vision for any centre becomes.

Other considerations around making a space equitable include:

- Negotiating and **developing a policy on boys and men accessing any space**, particularly where women have male children and male carers whom they would want to be able to accompany them, and also male allies. (We had hoped to cover this in the design workshop but failed to do so.)
- Paying close attention to the **design of the physical space**, including external and internal access requirements, access to information etc., to enable full participation and use of any space for **women with disabilities and/or long term health conditions**
- **Further discussions with neurodivergent women** to ascertain any particular needs they might have to make the space more accessible and welcoming for them, examples already highlighted include having a separate quiet space (this could be multi-functional for prayer and reflection) and/or dimmable lighting
- Considering what might be done to make any space welcoming and accessible to women with learning disabilities



Trans inclusion

During this work, trans women and non-binary femmes have expressed the feeling that a women's centre may well not be for them. **Trans women questioned whether a women's centre would really include them** and said that there would need to be explicit statements of inclusion for them to feel welcome. Some non-binary femmes expressed that a gender specific centre may not feel like it was a place that they would want to access.

We know that society at large is currently wrestling with these issues of inclusion, with some celebrating the move away from binary gender identities and others uncomfortable with it, feeling that from both an ideological and safety perspective any centre, (or indeed women's provision) should not be based on gender identity but on biological sex at birth.

As outlined in the findings, there is an expectation by many funders that services will be trans inclusive. Both sex and gender identity are included in the Equality Action 2010 - and services are navigating what that means in practice, with many organisations providing services where they can ensure that both cis women and trans women are kept safe.

We heard that there is the potential of picketing of any centre from both those who want such a space to be trans inclusive and those who would want it to be single sex. Careful attention needs to be paid to not perpetuating stereotypes. For example, we heard white middle class cis gendered women advocating passionately for trans inclusion and others from the same demographic equally passionately advocating for a single sex space. We heard Muslim women advocating for a single sex space and other Muslim women speaking up for the rights of all women to access any proposed space. In some of our interviews, women explicitly stated that they felt unsafe expressing their views in public and asked that they remain anonymous. These women said that they (women they live with/work alongside) would not engage with what they considered a multi-sex centre if it was trans inclusive.

Women's organisations do not have a legal choice around trans inclusion, but failure to undertake adequate risk assessments and manage risk well can lead to women being unsafe - for a number of reasons - and also leave the organisation open to legal challenge.²³

Managing a trans inclusive centre needs to be done well and respond to the needs of both biological and trans women. Many women across all engagement methods of this study spoke about a drop-in 'space to just be', which would not be focused on offering particular groups and/or services. So the applicability of this process, where an assessment was made prior to attendance, is unlikely to be suitable for that sort of model.

We also heard from various sources that women want a place where they can **meet across differences (cultural, class, experience, etc.)**, and yet there was a skepticism from some (including those advocating for it) that, at this moment in time, a women's centre would embody rather than easing divisions (between genders and between definitions of gender identity).

A number of people expressed concern that it wasn't a conversation that could be held openly and our experience in the DESIGN workshop demonstrated that it is challenging to hold a space in which women with strong views across the discussion can all feel respected and heard.

Not without irony, spaces where women can meet safely across difference, both to find commonalities and potentially have challenging conversations are needed! It is a **complex issue and one that needs more attention and careful consideration** before a decision is made as to what happens next.

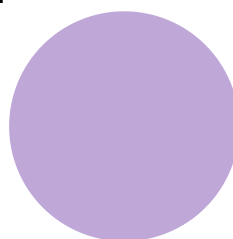
How would this become a sustainable facility?

Whilst the activities run within the centre may well secure funding from charitable trusts and foundations, it is essential that this is achieved **without competing** for funds with WGAL organisations. Funding is scarce - and a lot of funding allocated to the women's sector across the UK is already being accessed by women's organisations in Leeds.

We have been able to provide a list of **127 potential funders**, but acknowledge that many of these are smaller funders and that additional work to develop a robust business plan would be required, as well as identifying potential 'strategic start up' funds.

For any centre to become sustainable it is likely that it will need to have **multiple income streams and consider some form of commercial activity**. We have covered this in detail and noted additional work that will be required if WGAL decides to proceed with developing a women's centre in Leeds.

We should also note that a lot can be achieved with little funding - particularly in regard to self-organised space. 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.



6. Detailed Findings

a) Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted as part of the discover stage of the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) process and followed the broad pattern of AI within them (including prompt questions around discover, dream, design & deliver). Interview content differed depending on each individual interviewee's responses, the direction they followed & pertinent topics they chose to discuss. Information has been coded to ascertain how often issues were raised, giving some indication of the importance of the issue across the whole cohort of interviewees.

We interviewed and/or have had conversations with over 50 people²⁴ and themes emerged.

19 WGAL staff members in 12 interviews

32 wider stakeholders across 30 interviews

Location

The city centre was indicated as a preferred location by three times as many interviewees (22), compared to interviewees who indicated a preference for a fixed location in a local community (7). There was enthusiasm for a central place to bring services together & enable a much more strategic approach, with women at the centre. It was highlighted that, at this moment in time the city centre is undergoing major redevelopments, and therefore it feels like a good time to explore it (3). The city centre was the preferred location, largely to do with it being equally accessible from all parts of the city; also that it would afford discretion to access advice/services outside of a particular, close knit local community where privacy can be a challenge. However, it was acknowledged that the city centre can feel particularly inaccessible to women experiencing anxiety and/or lacking confidence to be alone in the city centre & that some women rarely leave their local community.

A hub & spoke model was suggested as a compromise of both (6), with a central location which also supports activities in communities. One interviewee advised against hosting in a location that falls between communities, as this doesn't work for anyone (citing the example of a youth centre located between Middleton & Belle Isle which wasn't well attended by young people in either community). Another interviewee highlighted that the services/activities that the centre offers, may well influence where it should be located.



Safety

The issue raised with most frequency was safety (18), how women need to feel safe & that it can be challenging to meet women's varied needs for safety in one space. This included a range of issues, including:

- That many women feel unsafe in particular locations & at particular times (city centre, green spaces, unlit areas, particularly at night)
- Concern that predatory males may follow vulnerable girls & women to any centre which might in turn make other women & girls vulnerable
- That women who have experienced sexual violence, abuse or particular trauma may not feel safe in a trans inclusive women's centre
- That the notion of safety for (some) women from particular cultural or religious backgrounds involves the freedom to remove items of clothing or discuss particular issues without fear of being seen/overheard by people they perceive as male

What takes place within a centre would influence whether it should be widely publicised or a discreet location, which impacts on safety considerations & the ways in which safety can be ensured. Risk management was highlighted as critically important within any potential centre along with safeguarding protocols & practices for under 18 users.

Interviewees also focused on the need to pay attention to safety needs of women outside the safe space, especially if it is located in the city centre where, they observed, many women report not feeling safe (4). The importance of good management, supervision, volunteer support and so on was emphasised by one interviewee, who had experience of plans for the development of a volunteer-led space where, 'due to Health and Safety and multiple other regulations, this just wasn't ultimately possible, and the situation culminated in some real hurts, disappointments and difficulties for community members'.

'If I went into space & saw all the nations of the world represented on the walls, that would make me feel safe. If I knew there was a group of women who look like me, people to meet & greet who look like me, that would make me feel: "I belong here".'



What should take place in a centre?

Groups and services

Central space for organisations to use

Self-directed informal space



What should take place in a centre?

Self-directed, informal space: The desire for a centre to be attractive & accessible to ALL women & not simply a place to access services, was a significant theme (10). The notion of an informal space was popular - a space where women could have agency to do what they'd like in the moment (9). Aligned with this, opportunities for peer support (11) came through as a dominant theme, in contrast to the need for organised groups on particular issues (2); some interviewees referenced the particular need for space in which self-help/survivor-led groups can meet & that examples of good practice could potentially be scaled up (4) facilitating a shift away from services towards more self empowerment (3). Particularly in reference to girls/young women we heard that it could be great to have a place where they could go, do things, 'be who they see' & realise their full potential (2).

Central space for organisations to use: Some WGAL organisations & several external organisations expressed the potential to use a city centre space for their services, either alongside or as an alternative to their current location (10), or as a place to provide women-only groups & activities (9). There was enthusiasm for the idea of a colocation/hotdesking space for WGAL staff which could potentially include staff from other organisations (7) this could support joined up working across existing services & provide a central place to conduct team meetings, staff training or supervisions. It was felt that a centre would have the potential to also improve joined-up working with & between wider Third Sector organisations, to reduce duplication and that any centre would need to be distinctive, and work

alongside, existing services (5).

Groups & services:

That said, there were lots of potential things that interviewees felt could be offered within a centre:

- Training, skills development, employment support & small business support (9)
- Mental health services & support (9)
- Drop in (9)
- Cafe (9)
- Childcare whilst activities take place (9)
- Access to information (& potentially services; described by some as a 'one stop shop') (8)
- Skills & training (7)
- Support getting into employment (7)
- Wellbeing activities & support (6)
- Facilities for women to cook their own food for each other (6)
- Business development support/guidance & information (including turning hobbies into business) (5)
- Business start up space/affordable workspaces (3)
- Access to information (4)
- Out of office hours support (3)
- Networking/meeting place for young professionals (3)
- Bridging space between one service & wider services (3)
- Intergenerational space (2)
- Exhibitions/cultural offer (2)
- Practical skills training eg DIY (2)
- Neutral venue for women with trauma/complex needs to meet support workers (2)
- Digital inclusion (1)
- Generic opportunities as well as those for particular demographics/needs (1)
- Access to information on legal rights (1)

What should a centre be like?

Interviewees placed an emphasis on the importance of **welcome** (10). This covered various aspects, including how the space is hosted, that skilled people with the ability & capacity to manage & hold the space is essential, that diverse women should be visible in the staff team & in pictures on walls.

The words **community & belonging** (6) were used to describe what a woman's experience of the space should be. Within this, the importance of the need for proactive outreach & welcome before a woman steps into a centre was referred to (5).

A regular, **reliable** location & what is offered within it were raised as particularly important to neurodivergent & learning disabled women (6). Interviewees highlighted the importance of trauma-informed delivery (4), including the suggestion that all staff (reception, cleaner, barista) should be trained & confident to speak about mental health & trauma-related issues. The need for clear communication in multiple languages was also raised (3).

It was acknowledged that in the current economic climate, **affordability** is a key issue, that 'working class' women of all ethnicities are struggling at the moment & that some women may need support with transport costs (6). Others with anxiety or low self confidence may need additional support to help them access a centre in the city centre (2). Providing childcare, whilst women take part in activities was also highlighted as another important access issue (6).

Inclusion

Wide-ranging issues around inclusion were expressed, including the importance of paying careful attention to accessibility for diverse minoritised & marginalised groups (including women of faith, disabled &/or neurodivergent women, women on low incomes & LGBTQ+ women) (10). Interviewees advocated for an environment in which women could meet across difference, rather than reinforcing it (7).

Opinion around whether trans women should be included in a space was divided, with several women asking to remain anonymous regarding the views they expressed. Some interviewees emphasised the importance of a centre being accessible only to biological women (8) & others emphasised the importance of a centre being trans inclusive (10). Several interviewees questioned whether this would be a divisive issue, whatever decision is made in this respect, & therefore whether it was wise to open a women's centre at this particular point in time:

'I am very passionate about trans inclusion. If you create a women's only centre, then you are creating potential for conflict & we don't want conflict where we don't have to have it. Politicians won't want it because it's such a hot potato. There are not enough spaces in communities where women can meet. Ultimately we need to ask ourselves, does it make women safer & happier? Does this really make the biggest difference to the lives of women across the city?'



Other interviewees echoed this fear of resistance to a women's space (4), with one exploring the local complexity in some depth:

“

'I imagine that one of the big, almost immediate arguments, will be around transgender. The discussion is so polarised; I don't think anybody reasonable thinks there isn't a discussion to have, it's just you can't have the discussion. It's a risk anywhere, but Leeds does seem to be a hotbed. I would expect a trans inclusive space. But there are a large number of feminists who don't agree with that, in Leeds & you can't ignore the fact that they are there. If you have a physical centre that is trans friendly you can almost guarantee that they are going to go for you, probably not in the planning stage, but in the execution stage.'

Several interviewees (5) expressed the desire for both trans inclusion & the need for female-only for some activities, however they were unsure how this could be implemented well in practice. One interviewee suggested that the centre can't happen if the building isn't big enough to accommodate all women. Another interviewee was passionate that, until this chestnut is cracked, nothing should be started.

'We're in a place in the world where we don't know how to ask questions because we're all so worried about offence. And we're all really concerned by the ramifications of asking a question if it's not received in the way we think it will be received... People look at it & say, well that's too complicated, I won't ask those questions, it's not worth interrogating because I'll upset everyone.'

But it actually really is. Because if we're to progress any of these ideas forward, we can't do it without acknowledging that there's real challenge to be overcome first. It's not always easy & it's not going to keep everyone simultaneously happy. But even an acknowledgement that those questions have been probed, that we've tried. Because you don't want to set up a women's centre that says: well these women can stick to their label & come at this time & then these women can come & use the cafe at this time because this is their label. At the end of the day what we're saying is, by identifying with the label of woman, you're just welcome here. But to get to that point, there's an enormous amount of challenge between A & B.'

”

Some expressed the view that an inclusive community space which is promoted as women, child & age friendly would be preferable; this would also better accommodate non-binary gender identities (2).

'Inclusivity can quickly move to becoming exclusive.'

”

UK women's centres' perspectives on inclusion

As we noticed inclusion becoming a significant issue that needed further exploration through the process of engaging with people across the city, we spoke to a number of women's centres across the country to ask them how they navigated this issue, particularly focusing on trans inclusion. Some of those we spoke with asked to remain anonymous as they did not feel confident speaking out about their views and practices on trans inclusion.

There were four notable exceptions to this:

The Women's Resource Centre, an umbrella organisation that represents the interests of women's organisations, have issued a statement which explores in depth the current context that the women's sector is in, 'caught between a rock and a hard place', arguing the case for women-only services and sex-based rights, but also noting that 'transgender people should unequivocally be able to access specialist services that meet their often complex needs'. They also point out that many women's organisations are already trans-responsive, and call for support in 'demanding sufficient funding for specialist "led-by-and-for" organisations so that all of our needs can be met'. Their statement can be found [here](#).

Virago Women's Workshop, a women's centre in Headingley, Leeds are explicit in providing a single-sex service. It is a volunteer-run Community Interest Company formed by a group of women in 2021 to provide a single sex

facility in Leeds. Their vision is that women-only spaces are valued and preserved, empowering women to express themselves freely. They provide a creative space, a social hub and a feminist library. Their policy can be found [here](#).

Nottingham Women's Centre's board of Trustees agreed their trans inclusion policy on 1st June 1998, although trans women were positively accessing the centre for many years before that date. They have a cafe space which is open to all who identify as women, and also offer particular groups for particular needs. Their statement can be found [here](#). All self identifying women are welcome to the centre and they do not undertake risk assessments to access the space at the centre or join in groups/ activities.

Hopscotch Women's Centre operates from its base in north London and runs its services across London. They have operated for decades, providing a range of services to women and girls including, support around domestic abuse, welfare and benefits advice, job skills training & support with achieving better employment opportunities, mental health advocacy, refugee advocacy and support groups, especially for older women and teenage girls. They also run a home care service which is commissioned by the local authority. They work across all racially minoritised communities, including Bangladeshi, Somali, Arabic speaking people, south American people, and other south Asian people.

Hopscotch services are available to **all** women and they are proud to be trans inclusive. Their policy can be found [here](#).

Their journey to be trans inclusive started a couple of years ago with discussions around LGBTQI+ inclusivity. Last year they commissioned Che Barnes to deliver gender training to Hopscotch to support the organisation's understanding of the physiology of gender.²⁵

They consider it their role to assess and manage risk so that service users feel safe. They also feel that it is important to be explicitly trans-inclusive so that their policies and procedures reflect this.

Their Homecare service has clients from the LGBTQ+ communities. Many of their care workers come from traditional Asian backgrounds. 'We train them well and they know they have to leave any personal beliefs at home. We always let them know who they are going to be working with so that they can be prepared and provide a professional service – which they take pride in delivering.'²⁶

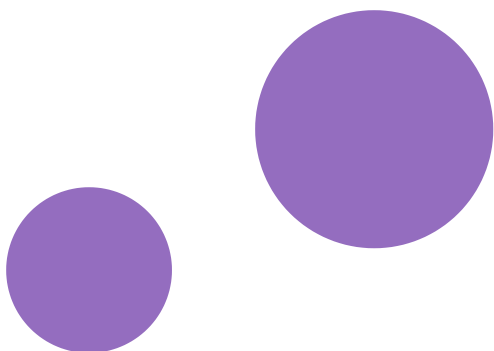
Hopscotch also provide training to other organisations and are willing to support WGAL develop a new women's centre in Leeds. Their CEO, Benaifer Bhandari can be contacted via email: Benaifer.bhandari@hopscotchuk.org



Being inclusive isn't about everyone attending everything. It is about everyone being safe. We look at all our service users as individuals. It is personalised care in action. When anyone new asks to join a group, we do a risk assessment to make sure it is the right group for them. We want to know if they have a disability, or mental health issues, or if they are neurodivergent ... or if they are trans. We do this to make sure it is the right group for them – and the other participants. If we think it isn't the right group for a trans woman, we will try to set up a separate group. This is a great opportunity to connect with the local LGBTQ+ community and find out if anyone else is interested in or needs a specific group. We would be as sensitive if we had a predominantly South American mental health group session and a Bangladeshi woman asked to join.'

Other women's organisations appear to be trans responsive but have not resolved internal tensions within their organisations and are not comfortable with openly stating that they are trans inclusive.

All women's centres have inclusive policies - they have to in order to be operating within the law. Also, most if not all funders require a statement on how the service/organisation is trans inclusive as part of any funding application. No organisation we spoke with - other than Virago - is actively trans exclusive.



Development approach

During our conversations with WGAL leaders there was majority support for the development of a women's centre, whilst emphasising capacity & funding issues, they appreciate the opportunity to explore WGAL being 'greater than the sum of its parts'.

Altogether seven interviewees brought a focus onto the way any centre is developed, indicating the potential of co-production with users/a 'led by & for' approach (5), working in wider partnership (2) & a space being co-owned rather than an organisation/entity in its own right (2). It was recognised that how any initiative is owned & managed will be influenced by what it is decided should take place (2).

Oversight was also mentioned in reference to creating equitable use of the space so that one demographic doesn't dominate (5), that whichever women you would like to access the space, would need to be reflected in the leadership of it (3), that if there is a blank canvas then priority should be given to marginalised & minoritised women to paint it (3) & the importance of a diverse staff team (3).

"It could be a resource that goes to making a real difference to the lives of women - including those who find themselves in crisis. It could go some way to ensuring they are not left behind or left out."

Funding

The challenge of securing funding in the current economic climate was highlighted as the biggest barrier to opening a women's centre (13). This included the recognition that many current funding streams are short term (6) & the associated challenge of securing sufficient funding to develop a service with longevity (6) as well as concerns about any fundraising taking away funding from existing services (5).

'We [the Third Sector] are in a squeeze - but it's in moments like this that innovation happens & good creative thinking can come through.'

The need for any centre to be run on a business model with diverse income streams was highlighted & that income generation in any centre would be imperative (space hire, small charges, office rental etc) (4).

'Maybe this isn't the time for a grandiose scheme. Maybe build foundations then when time is ready build the house. If you have a big picture of 3-5 years & how you'd deliver it if you had resources, then you could pull together small time-limited pilots to feed into an evidential base for a future women's centre - using small activities that don't cost much to build the evidential base. Let's be more targeted about our thinking. We could pull together networking opportunities relatively easily & test what works in different communities.'

Is this what women in Leeds most need?

There were various issues that were highlighted as particular unmet needs of women & girls in Leeds at the current moment:

- **Access to emergency accommodation** particularly for vulnerable young women in crisis (including those without recourse to public funds) (6)
- **Women only fitness opportunities** (including swimming, gym, yoga) (3)
- **Preventive health interventions** (2)
- **Access to sexual health services** for young women (in particular students) (1)
- **Day trips/ aspirational experiences** e.g. seaside, Lake District (1)

Several interviewees were very clear that they don't think a women's centre is what is most needed for women in Leeds (6). Reasons for this were various, including:

- Challenges with inclusion issues (can one size fit all?)
- The current economic climate & all the associated funding challenges
- Increasing demand for existing services & the challenge of resourcing them
- Competition with other initiatives eg discussions in the wider Third Sector for a co-location space, plans for the development of an LGBTQ+ hub in the city centre

Several interviewees questioned whether it will make the most impact on the most women in the city & there were several suggestions for things that might be more impactful & responsive to the needs of women & girls at the current time:

- **Map existing provision** & improve information & access (5)
- **Network existing women's centres** so that any women can access any space during opening hours (a network of 'women's warm spaces') (1)
- **Support the NHS**, as the biggest employer in Leeds, to have more women-friendly HR policies & practices (1)
- **Run a programme of training** around the needs of vulnerable women for statutory services (1)
- **Organising & campaigning** on existing issues identified, such as housing & health, like has successfully happened with women's safety (1)
- **Run education & awareness programmes** in schools around relevant pressing issues misogyny, islamophobia (1)
- **Provide therapeutic play services** for (young) children who've experienced trauma (1)
- **Make existing community centres more women friendly** (1)
- **Why not do something that's a trailblazer** instead of replication of what we already know eg work particularly with the growing female population working in the tech industry in the city (1)



b) Focus Groups

Nine Focus Groups and two conversation groups were held as part of the discovery phase of the study. ²⁷

These invited participants to focus on current needs of women in Leeds & potential responses. Groups were chosen to cover a broad demographic & to ensure that, should the survey have lower participation from marginalised communities, particularly around race, sexuality, gender identity, then we ensured we had heard some perspectives from people within these communities.

They took place instead of existing meetings, some were particularly arranged & informal conversations took place during existing sessions.

Altogether we spoke to over 120 women across the following 11 groups:

- Leeds City Council (LCC) women councillors
- LCC employees network
- Women's Speak Advisory Group (lived experience group for WGAL)
- Culturally Diverse Women's Hub (part of WFL)
- Ambassadors Group (part of WFL)
- Women Survivors Group
- Women's Space LGBTQIA+ Group
- Getaway Girls
- Knit & Natter (at Feel Good Factor)
- Feminist Archive Network (Leeds University)
- Angels of Freedom social

Similar to the interviews, the focus of the conversation was on unmet needs amongst women & girls in the city. Where time permitted, we went on to discuss potential responses & how a women's centre might meet these. Some of the themes that emerged from focus groups echoed those highlighted by the interviews & the findings are sequenced to mirror the headings in the interview findings. Unsurprisingly, there were differences expressed between the various groups. Where only one group raised a particular issue they have been named, otherwise particular groups are not referenced.

Location

The city centre as a location for a generic women's centre was highlighted as a barrier for some women, both due to safety concerns & to do with affordability of access (10). Within the context of dreaming big (!), there was an appetite for particular centres in particular communities (8) & that pop ups might work in order to offer a localised service (3). There was again the recognition of the challenge that it is unlikely that 'one size can fit all' (3).



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

Safety was again the issue that was highlighted with most frequency (10), with women speaking about not feeling safe at night, the city centre being 'unsafe to get to' & the 'town centre has a vibe of unsafety'.

Participants focused on opening times being important for being able to access & travel to a centre (8) & a list of barriers to access was offered by participants from the Culturally Diverse Women's Hub:

- Unhelpful bus drivers
- Cash
- Childcare
- Bus fare/travel costs
- Strict family - same in city centre or pop up
- Not seeing themselves in literature that promotes centre
- Location
- Safety
- Day & time
- Poor mental health
- Disabilities - both seen & unseen
- Parking if want to drive
- Accessibility of the building
- Proximity

Again it was indicated that ALL staff being women is an important factor in women feeling safe (7), that staff & attendees should 'look like me' (5) & that staff should have received trauma-informed training & be experts by experience themselves (4).

A whole array of issues to do with access where highlighted as important considerations in any women's space, including:

- Consideration of cultural backgrounds, languages & differences (6)
- Any information/advice needs to be accessible to women with limited English (5)
- Childcare being offered (6)

Discretion & privacy were again indicated to be important factors for women accessing any services within a centre (4) & that anything taking place in the space should be delivered in a 'women friendly' way, with a nurturing, matriarchal (rather than patriarchal) ethos (2). We heard of a desire for intergenerational interaction (2). At Angels of Freedom we heard comments about the importance of any space being a 'sober' space.

What should
take place in a
centre?

Self-directed
informal space

Groups and
services

Central space
for organisations
to use

Self-directed, informal space

Giving agency to women to make decisions about what happens in the space, focusing on a social space which women could occupy as they want to was again highlighted as necessary (in contrast to a focus on organisations offering services/groups in the space) (8).

'We need a wellbeing space. In the Black community from young we are told we have to work twice as hard & be driven. We don't have time to rest. We need to unlearn & relearn. To take time for ourselves.'

Women are keen to have a space where they can just drop in (9), a place where they can meet together, make new friends & buddy up (9), a space for fun, joy & creativity (dance was mentioned!) (8), where they can eat together (7), that it should be a space which welcomes & is able to host difficult conversations (3) & at one group a women-only cafe was mentioned. At the Feminist Archive Network one woman commented:

'I'm of a generation where I remember the women's centres that we used to have and there were very many. And they were very different beasts, really. And they were places where women organised, they were grassroots organisations, which often didn't have a great deal in the way of financing but you know, kept going just and that was where women organised at a grassroots level. So in a sense, they were political. And this is sounding very service rather than political to me.'

Groups & services

Various groups also shared specific services that they themselves, women they work with or know in their communities, would also benefit from taking place in a women's centre, including:

- Access to healthcare & support groups, such as menopause support & post Covid recovery support (9)
- Information & advice (eg. women's rights, claiming benefits, legal rights, safe travel) (9)
- Signposting, both to activities & services within the building & external services (8)
- Education & skills development (8)
- Crisis support (7)
- Mentoring & role models for girls & young women (6)
- Counselling services (6)
- Small business support (3)
- Housing support (2)
- Alternative therapies (such as massage & meditation) (2)
- Exercise facilities (2)
- Skills share (1)
- Self defence classes (1)
- Outdoor, nature space (1)

Central space for organisations to use

Co-location of women's services was highlighted as a huge benefit to a central women's space (5). One group also commented on how it would be useful to have a space which could host small community groups (that didn't have a long waiting list like other spaces seem to).



'It would be great to have a space for trans women to get ready and glam for Leeds First Friday, that would have make-up artists or those in training to help get the women ready for the night. Also a place to feel safe and meet other trans women.'

What should a centre be like?

Alongside the priority issues of feeling safe & being accessible, it was also commented that a centre should feel 'judgement free' (1). Particularly at Angels of Freedom, women suggested that the name of any space is vitally important: 'Women's centre to me means somewhere for women in need, when something negative has happened to them and they need help'; "Women's centre" sounds cheesy and cliché. The name might put people off'.

Inclusion

Inclusion was raised as an issue less frequently during Focus Groups than via other engagement methods (3). Within the LLC employees network trans inclusion was advocated for & there was active desire for a space which explores & celebrates the multiple ways of 'how to be a woman'; at other groups trans exclusion was advocated for.

At Angels of Freedom we heard both perspectives. At least three lesbian women stated the need for separate LGBTQIA+ spaces and single sex spaces: 'what you talk about is just different'; 'there has been times in my life where I wouldn't have felt safe in a space where there was anyone there who was not a woman'; 'I love LGBTQIA spaces, I need them, but I need a space to be with women too'. We spoke to three trans women who shared what trans inclusion actually means to them: 'It has to include trans inclusion in the publicity for me to feel safe to be included'; 'To feel safe, I'd need to see the presence of trans flags'; 'Seeing trans women of colour is important for me. It feels more accessible.'

The Women's Nightsafe Space was highlighted as an example of a women's space that does trans inclusion well - we heard that at Getaway Girls as well as Angels of Freedom, with participants:

In four groups the issue of full male exclusion was questioned, with suggestions made that male carers should be able to use a centre in order to enable those they care for to access the space (1), that male allies need to be welcomed (1) & that there should be 'men friendly' evenings as part of the centre's offer (2).

Funding

In three groups participants spoke about the wider economic context & their concerns around ongoing funding & sustainability of any initiative, including a desire for any new initiative to not detract resources from existing services.

Is this what women in Leeds most need?

There were several groups where support to access to existing services was highlighted as a key priority, even just to begin by mapping what is available in order to raise awareness (6).

In several groups participants emphasised that many women in the city are not able to meet their basic needs at the moment (6) & that this is the pressing issue facing women in the city currently.

c) Public Workshops

Three participatory public workshops were conducted. Two took place as part of the dream stage & one as part of the design stage. These were widely publicised & held at different times of the day to seek to be accessible to different women. **41 women attended these workshops.**

Dream Workshops

Conducted using World Cafe, a participatory conversation tool used to surface collective wisdom. Very similar content emerged at both workshops, as women were invited to dream together about Leeds & how the needs of women in the city could be better met (on the understanding that this may not necessarily be a centre based in a building). Having discussed what they would love to see for women in Leeds that isn't already happening, participants were invited to discuss & share: **What resource is needed for women in Leeds right now?**

There was plenty of conversation about a physical building space, with lots of enthusiasm for an accessible, flexible, self-organising, informal drop-in 'place to be who you are at that moment', perhaps including a cafe, where the following could easily take place:

- Peer support (both formal groups & informally)
- Conversation (including with women across different demographics eg. age, ethnicity)
- Recommendations (such as for tradespeople)
- Skillshare
- Mentoring
- Networking (individuals rather than organisations)
- Cooking for each other
- Connecting with similar groups

Participants described a vibrant place full of connection & community, with 'wrap around' greeting, where there isn't any judgement, where they have the opportunity to give as well as receive, where lived experience is valued & there are opportunities to share the wisdom gained from it, where all women feel safe & in which all staff are trauma-informed & any support groups operate in a trauma-informed way. They want the centre to be co-produced, with those who use it involved in every stage of the design, so that it's easy to use & for all staff to be women (no male cleaners, security etc.).

Women also described wanting a place which would make it easier to access services (explored primarily from the perspective of being in crisis) with support from centre staff to access services, as well as a 'resource hub' for information & signposting. They suggested free therapy with no waiting list & workshops & training on relevant issues, with separate rooms for community groups to run meetings/ events. They felt child care/creche facilities would be important to offer & that meaningful outreach would be necessary to help people to engage. They spoke about the need for good publicity in places women already go (GP, supermarket, school), through existing services (eg. Linking Leeds, women's websites) & in public places such as on billboards & the side of buses.



The subject of who could access the space was raised. Participants advocated from different perspectives: some for a centre inclusive of all women, others for a centre for biological women only & others for a people's centre, rather than a women's centre, to be fully inclusive of anyone in need of a place of welcome & community, irrespective of their gender identity. There were also questions (but no answers) around whether male children & carers could access the centre. They want it to be a political space, where topics that are important to women are claimed.

Participants want any space to be permanent, recognising the current challenging funding climate & suggest businesses might be willing to support a centre financially. They would love there to be satellite spaces throughout the city & a space that is open 24/7!

Other suggestions for what resource is needed for women in Leeds, deemed by proposers as potentially more important than a women's centre right now:

- Skilled, empathetic women workforce
- Connecting & networking existing resources
- Asset database of organisations that have signed up to contributors of women's centre/ women-friendly spaces - needs to be regularly updated so it's totally current
- Think tank/data sharing to improve support/care & catalyse change - research & influence
- Better access to communal spaces
- Accessing local community spaces
- Safe green spaces

The workshop ended with women sharing their dreams for women in Leeds. They are pictured throughout this report. We received positive feedback:



"I thought the session on Wednesday was brilliant, it was so lovely to make connections with other women in the area, and to dream together about what might be possible. A really inspiring evening!"



"I thought the process was brilliant, it really encouraged participation and free thinking. So thank you for that and I really do hope that something concrete will come of this proposal."

Public Design Workshop

This was conducted a month after the dream workshops, when headline survey data had been analysed & all Focus Groups & (most) interviews were complete. Assessing the data gathered so far indicated that there was a lot of enthusiasm for the potential of a women's centre to develop, with some important caveats & alternative opportunities highlighted (as explored elsewhere in these findings). Careful attention was paid to what aspects of design in a potential women's centre would be critical & were yet unclear based on the findings to date.

Safety, access & inclusion were identified as the three key pillars on which a women's centre needs to be developed, in order to establish a foundation of trust. All three issues are interlinked, complex & what some might refer to as 'sticky' issues. At this stage, we lacked clarity from our findings on how a women's centre in Leeds might get them right, what we did know is that, if they are got right, they build a foundation of trust which we had heard time & again is essential for any new women's centre initiative to thrive.

Our intention was to find solutions & a way forward for these issues. Separate conversation tables on safety, access & inclusion highlighted particular solutions.

Safety

Before you enter the building:

- Having clear information, to help them decide whether or not the women's centre is for them e.g. location, opening hours, directions, activities/ groups/ services on offer etc.

- Clear details about what will be taking place in the centre when
- A virtual tour available online would help women know what to expect within the centre
- Could there be a mechanism to let the women's centre know you're planning on going, so that they know to expect you & follow up if for any reason you don't arrive?
- How can I feel safe once I am inside the building? 'Giving space to anti-trans doesn't feel safe'. 'I would consider picketing a centre if it had an anti-trans stance'. 'I'd feel uncomfortable with trans women in the space'. What about gender fluid & non-binary people? These issues were all raised but we were not able to navigate a way forward that felt mutually agreeable.

When you first enter the building:

- How does sign in happen? Does it need to happen? Can people use false names if they don't want to be identified? What about fire safety? How do bars/shops mitigate this without needing a sign in sheet before someone enters them?
- Could it be done via QR code to protect anonymity?
- Could it be one touch iPad (like at a GP surgery) to make it as easy as possible if it is needed?
- No segregation & no dominance
- Have a clear 'menu' of possible ways to engage, use symbols & make it as easy as possible to engage with

Safety

Access

Inclusion

Once you're in the building:

- Trained staff who know what to do when someone is in crisis - or just needing someone to talk to - and who can pay attention to the safety of an individual's mental health as well as physical wellbeing
- Have a safety point, similar to at a gym, where a woman can go to call for assistance if she felt unsafe - this is a buzzer system
- Could the safety point have a 'friendship bench' nearby so that the woman could sit down & someone could simply sit beside her
- Allow each individual to be 'in control' - offer options for what they can do, they choose
- Pay attention to language & noise within the space
 - Make it welcoming & calming for neurodivergent women
 - Have a sensory space
 - Pay attention to lots of different languages
 - Consider what is communicated nonverbally in the space
- Should alcohol/drugs be allowed in the building, as this could be a trigger for some?

Access

Before you enter the building:

- Information is needed for women to know when they can access a centre, to include opening times, location, bus routes, bike parking
- Some women may need transport costs covered
- Regular open days are needed to promote the centre
- There should be a good online presence, for women to find out what is on when; this needs to be kept up to date
- A virtual tour available online would help women know what to expect within the centre

When you first enter the building:

- Friendly reception, with greeters available to check in with someone as they come into the new space, to ease stress & anxiety for the guest
- Someone should be available to offer a guide to the centre & where toilets & others facilities are

Once you're in the building:

- Workers should be wearing lanyards, so it is easy to identify them
- Timetables clearly indicating what will take place that day would be useful
- Large print displays, including relevant information about the building as well as any information available about services
- An outdoor space would be lovely, to enjoy time outside & potentially an opportunity to learn new skills eg growing
- Women who use the centre should lead the design of it & the development of services within it.



Inclusion

Before you enter the building:

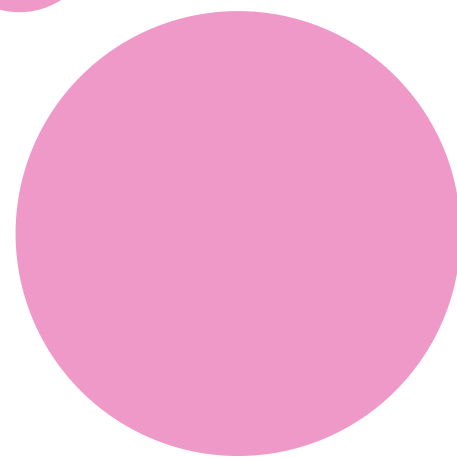
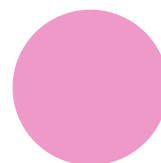
- Clarity on who the space is for (are trans women welcome or is it a single sex space for women born as females?)
- This will influence who wants to access the space - some will boycott a trans-friendly centre; female trans allies may choose not to access a centre that doesn't welcome trans women. Some women felt that a trans-inclusive space would make them feel excluded.
- Can particular events be hosted to meet the needs of particular women at different times? For example; sessions for trans women, muslim women where they feel safe and comfortable enough to remove their hijab.

When you first enter the building:

- Not having to justify who you are. It wouldn't be a place where women's bodies were policed and we were asked to identify ourselves.
- No rules but clear expectations. Women are free to be who they want to be but there are clear guidelines of how to be/behave in the space to ensure everyone is respected and has the choice to enter if the expectations align with theirs.

Once you're in the building:

- Food needs to be free, or 'pay as you can' even just a free slice of cake. This levels the playing field and doesn't make those who are in need of food feel insecure about asking and their need is not noticeable and they can retain their dignity.
- Lived experience should be recognised. Staff should be those with lived experience of some of the most pressing issues of women so they are trauma-informed and welcoming and have an intuitive sense of care for the women that enter the space.
- Need to see people like you in the space - young, old, sex workers, Black women, Muslim women
- Non-judgemental. It would be great to be in a space where no one passes judgement on you or your circumstances. You should just be able to 'just be'
- Totally disability friendly & fully accessible
- Space needs to feel nurturing, comfortable, full of warmth. But what does this mean for all women? This was yet to be fully defined.
- People need to be kind & benevolent & that atmosphere needs to infuse the space.



Design of a centre

The centre itself needs to be simple in design so it is easy to navigate once women are in the building, with an open area so that women can see in as well as designated areas for particular needs e.g. quiet space for prayer, reflection. Lighting needs to be dimmable to accommodate light sensitivity. Warm, cosy blankets around the space help people to feel safe & included. There should be a suggestion box & guests should be invited at least quarterly to share their feedback. A 'women's card' was suggested, as a way of giving women discounts & offering promotions when women use a centre and access services.

Following separate table discussions, all participants then mapped together to uncover the intersections between all three areas, resulting in the following Venn Diagram:

Venn diagram capturing feedback on safety, access & inclusion & intersections thereof:



During the workshop we heard lots of rich feedback for particular actions that could be taken to make any centre safe, inclusive & accessible. However, whilst the space was carefully curated, we weren't successful in implementing the three pillars fully within the workshop itself. Differing perspectives were expressed on the need for trans women to be fully welcomed & included in any women's centre; some advocated strongly that it should be a single sex centre exclusively for biological women. This led to the workshop not feeling like a safe or inclusive space for some participants, some of whom chose to leave early as a result.

The workshop also did not manage to cover some other important inclusion issues that had been raised through the other engagement methods, particularly around if & when it might be appropriate for men to access a centre (for example male carers or male allies), & how comfortable - or not - women feel about teenage boys using the centre (ie. accompanying their mum) and under what conditions/for what activities.

Our experience of running the workshop demonstrates in practice how challenging it can be to hold conversations around difference well. It has highlighted that any options to move forward that WGAL decides to pursue need to pay careful attention to safety & inclusion.

d) Survey

An online survey was developed using information gained from the early stages of the data collection from interviews & focus groups.

The survey was carefully designed to elicit sufficient quantitative data around particular key areas, including location, timings & potential activities and services that could be offered within a centre.

The survey was 'live' for just under ten weeks, from 12th Dec 2023 - 18th Feb 2024 & received 601 responses.

Ethnicity

- 76.66% of respondents indicated they are White British/ English/ Scottish/ Welsh/ Northern Irish compared to 79% in the general Leeds population.²⁸
- The survey received a lower percentage of Asian, Asian British & Black, Black British, Caribbean or African respondents compared to the general Leeds population, at 5.78% (9.7% Leeds) & 4.25% (5.6% Leeds) respectively. It had a higher response rate from other ethnic groups of 6.81% compared to the general Leeds population at 2.3%.
- In addition, 2.56% of respondents also chose to self describe their ethnicity & 2.39% of respondents chose not to disclose their ethnicity (both options not available in Leeds census data).

Overall, the survey failed to capture as much information from racially minoritised & diverse faith communities as we had hoped, which was disappointing, as we had worked hard to make contact with organisations working within these communities. The length of the survey & the fact that it was only available in English, although it could be requested in other languages, may have influenced this.

Religion, faith or belief

- 29.52% of survey respondents indicated they 'do not identify with faith or belief',
- 15.02% indicated they are atheist & 8.36% indicated they are agnostic, a combined total of 52.9%, compared to 40% in the general Leeds population who identify as having no religion.²⁹
- 24.57% of respondents indicated they are Christian compared to 42.3% in the general Leeds population.
- The survey engaged with more Jewish respondents than in the general Leeds population (2.39% compared to 0.8%) but received fewer responses from Hindus (0.51% compared to 1.1% in Leeds), Muslims (3.58% compared to 7.8%) % Sikhs (1.02% compared to 1.2%).

Age

- The survey received 154 responses from individuals aged 36-45 (25.93%) & 139 responses from individuals aged 46-55 (23.40%).
- Just under half of the respondents were aged between 36 and 55.
- 16.5% of respondents were aged 26-35, compared to 15% of the female population of Leeds being in this age range.
- 28.45% of respondents were aged 56+ compared to 27% of the female population of Leeds being in this age range.
- We received only 1 response from an individual aged 12-17, which was disappointing as we had circulated it to a number of organisations which work with girls (such as Leeds City College).

A copy of the survey can be found at Appendix M
A full set of demographic findings from the survey can be found at Appendix N.

Gender identity and sexual orientation

- 92.58% of respondents identify as female. Of the others, 10 were unsure how to describe themselves or prefer not to say, 10 91.6%0 were non-binary & 7 (1.16%0 were male.
- The survey was deliberately marketed to solicit responses from women & to ask them specifically to comment on their own use of a centre. As so few respondents were male, this number is unlikely to have skewed the data and we are confident that our data reflects the views of our target population which was women in Leeds.
- A further 27 respondents indicated that they are 'a gender not listed here', with 24 of those providing comments that indicated their sex was female and they "do not have a gender identity"
- 95.7% of respondents indicated that their gender now is the same as the sex they were given at birth. 1.9% (11) respondents indicated that their gender is different to the sex they were given at birth & 2.9% indicated that they 'prefer not to say'. Of the 11 who indicated that their gender is different to the sex they were given at birth, this includes 6 respondents who are non-binary & 3 whose response asserted that they are female & without a gender identity. It has therefore not been possible to draw any conclusions about the perspective of trans women from this survey.
- 69.45% of respondents indicated that they are heterosexual/straight compared to 87.9% of Leeds general female population (as described from Leeds census data).

Disability

- 34.06% of survey respondents indicated that they have a disability or long term condition.
- Many respondents indicated they have multiple disabilities & conditions, with the following experienced by over 10% of respondents: mental health difficulties - 43.87%, chronic long term illness - 43.4%, social communication & behaviour (autism, ADHD) - 25.47%, unseen (eg asthma, diabetes, epilepsy) - 19.81%, stamina, fatigue or breathing difficulties - 12.74% & hearing - 10.38%.
- We have not managed to track down comparable disability figures for Leeds.

Resident address

- 584 respondents gave a Leeds postcode for the address where they live.
- Responses were received from respondents in every Leeds postcode; LS12 & LS23 received the joint highest number of responses at 52; LS3 & LS29 only received one response each.



Location

Of those women who said they would probably or definitely use a women's centre (498):

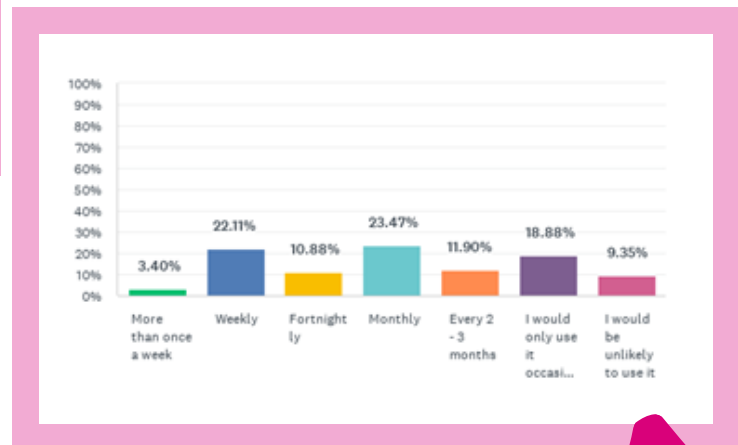
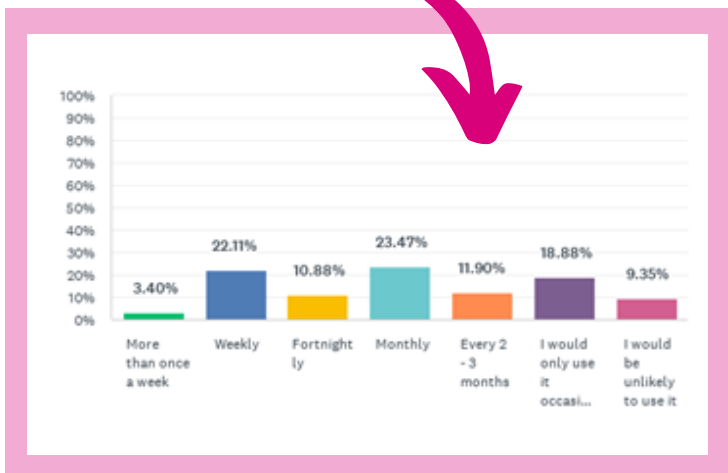
- 67.48% would use a women's centre if it was located in the centre of Leeds
- 59.43% would like to see 'pop-up' or temporary women-only spaces in local communities across Leeds.

In contrast:

- Around 18% said they would not use a women's centre located in the city centre and would only use one in their community (This rose to 28% of respondents aged in the 66+ age bracket)

Frequency of use

336 respondents (59.86%) indicated that they would attend a women's centre at least monthly. This rose to 71.72% of respondents who identify as having a disability or long term condition & 79.3% of racially minoritised respondents (40.8% of racially minoritised respondents indicated that they would use it weekly).



Time of use

Overall the most popular time respondents reported they would be likely to use a women's centre is on a weekend afternoon. This is the most popular time for racially minoritised respondents & respondents who identify as having a disability/long term health condition.

There was some difference according to age:

- Women aged 18-35 indicated that they would most likely to use it weekday early evenings between 5-8pm (63%)
- Women aged 66+ indicated that they would most use it on a weekday afternoon (67%)

Activities & services that should take place in a women's centre

The activities that respondents think should be offered in a women's centre were different to the activities that they reported they themselves were likely to access.

We asked the question: If Leeds had a women's centre, what do you think it should offer? (Respondents were able to tick a maximum of 10 options.)

The table shows activities/services where 30% or more of respondents who believe that Leeds probably or definitely needs a designated women's centre selected that the option should be offered in a women's centre in Leeds. This table compares percentage of respondents from racially minoritised communities that indicated each specific option and those who reported having a disability/ long term condition.

Percentages are highlighted in bold where there is a significant differentiation compared to one or more of the other columns.

	% of respondents who indicated that each activity/service should be offered	% of racially minoritised respondents who indicated that each activity/service should be offered	% of those with disability/ long term health condition who indicated that the activity/service should be offered
Access to counselling or therapy	60.68	58.73	62.38
Health and wellbeing groups eg. women-only health clinics, wellbeing support groups	59.88	52.38	54.95
Childcare whilst women attend activities or services within the space	54.49	55.56	55.94
Staff who offer advice, signposting and information regarding services for women	53.49	42.06	49.01
Training and advice to individual women regarding issues that affect them	42.91	39.68	39.06
Opportunities for women to be able to influence services for women in Leeds	42.71	41.27	43.07
Specialist training, advice and knowledge to organisations regarding issues that affect women	41.72	38.10	38.61
Sexual health services	38.32	26.98	34.66
Space where organisations that offer services to women can work together (to share ideas and provide 'joined-up' support for women)	37.33	34.13	33.66
Opportunities for women to connect with and spend time with other women socially	36.93	30.95	30.69
Opportunities for women to meet other women who share a similar cultural background and understanding	36.13	38.10	30.20
Access to wellbeing & holistic therapies	34.13	33.33	36.63
Easily accessible services specifically for women	33.93	24.06	38.61
Conferences & workshops on themes relevant to women	33.73	39.68	31.19
Opportunities for women to gather around common interests & activities	33.53	25.40	33.66
Meeting space for newly formed and smaller women's community groups	32.34	33.33	31.68
Women's only fitness classes, sporting opportunities, walking groups etc	30.94	38.89	28.71
Opportunities for women in business to network, share skills & build community	27.74	44.44	19.80
Facilities to support women that have/want to have a small business	19.76	32.54	19.31
Women only cafe	16.57	19.05	18.81

Percentages for a women only cafe are included here to represent the low response rate. It was anticipated by those we spoke to prior to the survey that this would be much higher.

In many services & activities, percentage response rates across all respondent groups was similar, with notable exceptions:

A higher percentage of respondents who identified as having disability/long term condition indicated that *Easily accessible services specifically for women should be offered* - this was 38.61% compared to 24.06% of respondents from racially minoritised communities & 33.73% of respondents who think that Leeds probably or definitely needs a women's centre.

A higher percentage of respondents who identified as being from racially minoritised communities (compared to the other groups) indicated that the following service/activity should be offered:

- *Opportunities for women in business to network, share skills & build community* - 44.44% compared to 27.74% of respondents who think that Leeds probably or definitely needs a women's centre
- *Facilities to support women that have/want to have a small business* - 32.54% compared to 19.76% of respondents who think that Leeds probably or definitely needs a women's centre
- *Conferences & workshops on themes relevant to women* - 39.68% compared to 33.73% of respondents who think that Leeds probably or definitely needs a women's centre
- *Women's only fitness classes, sporting opportunities, walking groups etc* - 38.89% compared to 30.94% of respondents who think that Leeds probably or definitely needs a women's centre

Fewer respondents from racially minoritised communities indicated that the centre should offer:

- Staff who offer advice, signposting and information regarding services for women - 42.06% compared to 53.49% of respondents who think that Leeds probably or definitely needs a women's centre
- Sexual health services - 26.98% compared to 38.32% of respondents who think that Leeds probably or definitely needs a women's centre
- Easily accessible services specifically for women - 24.06% compared to 38.61% for respondents with a disability & 33.73% of respondents who think that Leeds probably or definitely needs a women's centre
- Opportunities for women to gather around common interests & activities - 25.40% compared to 33.53% of respondents who think that Leeds probably or definitely needs a women's centre

There is less discrepancy between responses from respondents with a disability/long term condition and respondents who think that Leeds probably or definitely needs a women's centre than there was between responses from racially minoritised respondents and the respondents who think that Leeds probably or definitely needs a women's centre.

This is likely to be because 34.06% of **all** respondents indicated that they had a disability/long term condition compared to 23.14% of respondents who indicated being from racially minoritised communities. The responses of those indicating disability or long term health condition are more likely to be reflected in the global total.

Respondents were asked to indicate how likely they would be to use the services and activities listed.

The same list of activities & services was used as in the previous question. The table shows activities/services where 50% or more of one respondent group indicated that they were likely or extremely likely to access that service or activity. It compares the percentage of respondents who believe that Leeds probably or definitely needs a designated women's centre that indicated each specific option and those from racially minoritised communities and those who reported having a disability/ long term condition.

	% of respondents that are likely or extremely likely to access each service	% racially minoritised respondents that are likely or extremely likely to access each service	% respondents with disability/long term health condition that are likely or extremely likely to access each service
Conferences & workshops on themes relevant to women	74.24	86.40	69.85
Opportunities for women to be able to influence services for women in Leeds	68.23	70.16	70.05
Access to wellbeing & holistic therapies	66.94	70.40	67.17
Art & cultural events for women	66.87	67.20	64.65
Health and wellbeing groups - eg. women-only health clinics, wellbeing support groups	66.53	73.01	69.16
Opportunities for women to gather around common interests & activities	64.98	65.33	64.14
Easily accessible services specifically for women	65.65	68.80	65.99
Access to counselling or therapy	62.88	64.52	69.90
Specialist training, advice and knowledge to organisations regarding issues that affect women	62.60	71.43	56.06
Training and advice to individual women regarding issues that affect them	61.83	70.64	62.12
Opportunities for women to connect with and spend time with other women socially	61.51	65.60	61.23
Staff who offer advice, signposting and information regarding services for women	60.36	66.40	64.14
Space where organisations that offer services to women can work together (to share ideas and provide 'joined-up' support for women)	56.07	63.49	53.77
Women's only fitness classes, sporting opportunities, walking groups etc	55.19	64.28	47.98
Social arts & crafts groups (eg. knit & natter, card making, quilting)	52.86	54.40	58.38
Opportunities for women to be playful & have fun	49.9	55.64	50.76
Meeting space for newly formed and smaller women's community groups	46.92	54.04	49.24
Opportunities for women in business to network, share skills & build community	34.15	62.10	38.78
Facilities which women's organisations can hire	43.18	51.61	36.87
Opportunities for women to meet other women who share a similar cultural background and understanding	42.39	60	39.90
Gym	39.80	56	34.70
Facilities to support women that have/want to have a small business	31.84	51.62	27.92
Women only cafe	47.25	54.03	48.78
Childcare whilst women attend activities or services within the space	26.07	34.40	21.82

Percentages are highlighted in bold where there is a significant differentiation between the three columns.

For many services & activities, the percentage number of respondents across all respondent groups was similar, with the following notable exceptions:

A higher percentage of responses (58.38%) were received from respondents with a disability/long term condition (202) who said they were likely or extremely likely to access Social arts & crafts groups (eg. knit & natter, card making, quilting) compared to 52.86% of respondents who think Leeds probably or definitely needs a women's centre

A higher percentage of responses were received from racially minoritised respondents who said they were likely or extremely likely to access the following service/activity when compared to respondents who think Leeds probably or definitely needs a women's centre:

- Conferences and workshops on themes relevant to women - 86.40% compared to 74.24% of respondents who think Leeds probably or definitely needs a women's centre
- Specialist training, advice and knowledge to organisations regarding issues that affect women - 71.43% compared to 62.60% of respondents who think Leeds probably or definitely needs a women's centre
- Training and advice to individual women regarding issues that affect them - 70.64% compared to 61.83% of respondents who think Leeds probably or definitely needs a women's centre
- Opportunities for women in business to network, share skills & build community - 62.10% compared to 34.15% of respondents who think Leeds probably or definitely needs a women's centre
- Women's only fitness classes, sporting opportunities, walking groups etc - 64.28% compared to 55.19% of respondents who think Leeds probably or definitely needs a women's centre
- Opportunities for women to meet other women who share a similar cultural background and understanding - 60% compared to 42.39% of respondents who think Leeds probably or definitely needs a women's centre
- Gym - 56% compared to 39.80% of respondents who think Leeds probably or definitely needs a women's centre
- Facilities to support women that have/want to have a small business - 51.62% compared to 31.84% of respondents who think Leeds probably or definitely needs a women's centre.

47.86% of respondents who would probably or definitely use the space responded that they are not at all likely to access childcare whilst they attend activities or services within the space. This reduced to 35.6% of 18-45 year old women who said they would probably or definitely use the space (who we suggest as the group most likely to have children at home).

When we look at other services and activities that respondents indicated they were not at all likely to use, there are only two other services/activities that respondents were similarly not at all likely to use. These were:

- Cooking facilities (33.74 % of respondents said they were not at all likely to use)
- Hot-desking facilities (28.95% of respondents said they were not at all likely to use)

Of the 135 respondents who indicated that they are likely or extremely likely to access childcare,³⁰ we are able to provide a list of the top ten services & activities that they indicated they would be likely or extremely likely to access:

1. Health and wellbeing groups - eg. women-only health clinics, wellbeing support groups
2. Conferences & workshops on themes relevant to women
3. Access to wellbeing & holistic therapies
4. Access to counselling or therapy
5. Easily accessible services specifically for women
6. Opportunities for women to connect with and spend time with other women socially
7. Opportunities for women to be able to influence services for women in Leeds
8. Training and advice to individual women regarding issues that affect them
9. Staff who offer advice, signposting and information regarding services for women
10. Specialist training, advice and knowledge to organisations regarding issues that affect women

This list is also largely similar to the list of services & activities that respondents who indicated they would probably or definitely use a centre said they are likely or highly likely to access.³¹

What is a higher priority than a women's centre?

There was one qualitative question within the survey, where respondents were invited to share something they felt is a higher priority than a women's centre.

We received 270 responses. As this was the only box where people could comment, many respondents did not directly answer the question, but told us what they wanted us to know.

The issues they raised fall into the following themes overleaf.

Theme	Number of responses received related to this theme	Overview of responses
Inclusion	59	Most responses focused on trans inclusion/exclusion. Additional suggestions: male speakers, male professionals (eg. nurse), include classes for boys & men how to respect women. Other comments: Sexist & not a priority in the light of the current funding climate. Centre needed for all people, not just women. LGBT centre. Similar organisations have priced people out. Ensure it meets the needs of all marginalised & vulnerable women. Make it accessible to working class & middle class women alike. Help for women with older children, particularly single & disabled mums
Safety	50	Safe place(s) across the city. Nighttime safety. Better street lighting. More policy/police safety officers. Training in self defense techniques. Access to safe housing More female-only emergency accommodation. Safety on public transport (particularly evenings/nighttime) Safety in public spaces e.g. parks, city centre. Safety for transgender women. Safe access to advice & information. 'Making women & girls safer has a lot to do with educating men, so creating more exclusion zones seems unhelpful.' Continuing Women's Nightsafe Space
Develop existing services	23	Invest in existing services rather than creating something new Better publicity for what's already on offer. Link existing services together better. Use Sure Start centres. Provide women-only spaces in existing community centres. How can needs be better met through existing infrastructure? Pull existing services for women under one roof. Create more women only sessions in existing facilities e.g. leisure centres. Have a place where women can share together in a women centred way. Increase provision of counselling & sexual health services. Support for women going through the family court system
Education	13	Education in how to be a responsible adult citizen. Annual day in schools around gender equality. Education programme across schools. Education & campaign to reduce children's exposure to pornography. Educate men & boys about women's issues. Educate women in safety tips. Education in sexual safeguarding. More training for the police in issues affecting women increase male allies
Transport	11	Better, safer, more frequent bus services. Improve bus routes to not just run via the city centre
Children	11	Mum & toddler groups. Mum & baby centre accessible to all children under 10. Improve nursery/childcare provision. Affordable childcare provision. Provide childcare when you run activities. In person peer support with onsite creche
Young women/girls	10	Focus a centre on girls leaving high school. Opportunities for young women - youth groups or in schools. Create more spaces like Getaway Girls. Summer schools offering free & varied opportunities. More youth centres & youth workers

Mental health	8	Mental health support - either improving access to existing services or running a centre to offer it
Domestic abuse support	7	Protect women from abuse. Supporting survivors of sexual violence. Domestic violence centre
Housing	7	Safe, affordable, eco, community housing. Better social housing. Safe, affordable housing for vulnerable women
Finances/ cost	7	Women's financial issues. Support for women to become more financially independent. How will running costs be met?
Health	6	Menopause support. Health support & advice for homeless women. Eradicate period poverty. Women's NHS clinics
Counselling	4	More is needed
Homeless/ vulnerable women	3	Help for homeless women
Social care	2	Invest in social care
Elected representation	2	Encourage more women of all ages & backgrounds to stand for elected posts such as councillors etc.
Outdoor activities	2	What would vastly improve the health & wellbeing of women is more outdoor activities
Campaigning	2	Raise the priority of women's issues in the public domain. Create a women's alliance group
Older people	1	Something for the elderly community, so they are not isolated at home
Disabled accessibility	1	Town centre accessibility for disabled who cannot manage pedestrian only areas
Phone help line	1	Advice line for business, legal, family, income - dedicated phone line or web chat
Tourist information	1	Good tourist information centre like we had at the train station
Employment opportunities	1	Specifically for Roma women - not just those from Romania
Music therapy	1	
Universal basic income	1	
Men's centre	1	

'I think this is a great idea but I believe it's important that it is advertised correctly. So often great ideas & initiatives exist but no-one knows about it. For this to be successful & cater for everyone's needs a carefully curated marketing strategy is needed. Otherwise it will only cater those that actively seek it out which will give a limited blend of demographic & age.'



7. Options to pilot

Below we outline a series of options for consideration for the next phase of the feasibility - a pilot project. These options are not mutually exclusive but could be run concurrently depending on resource & capacity.

- A** Self-managed space with on-line booking system
- B** Regular hosted drop-in space
- C** Pop ups in local communities
- D** Conference/workshops/arts/cultural events
- E** Training for organisations on issues that affect women and/or influence services for women in Leeds
- F** Increasing resources & promoting access to existing counselling & therapy services
- G** Small business support & networking
- H** Pilot single directory for women's services across Leeds
- I** Increase access to women only fitness classes, sporting opportunities & gym facilities
- J** Pop-up services & activities in communities, including the city centre, to trial and develop a business case for further funding

A. Self-managed space with on-line booking system

What:	Space available for groups of women book & use at times that are convenient to them
Of interest to particular demographic groups?	N/A but see below [when]
Additional comments from participants: ³²	A space to be rather than structured space providing specific services. Whatever is developed needs to be user-led rather than professionally driven. Desire for permanence. Careful attention needs to be paid to safety. Where they can meet & be with other women, Where they can just drop in. Where they are able to volunteer as well as benefit from the space. Which is intergenerational & intersectional. Where they can exchange information e.g. skills swap, recommendations for tradespeople. Where women can go, whether in crisis or just wanting somewhere to sit.
Where:	Pre-existing space within one or more of the WGAL members' buildings?
Other organisations/information to consider:	Lead volunteers might need to be vetted volunteers need access to good quality training on being trauma informed as well as safeguarding need to be mindful of health and safety regulations amongst others community-led/managed space can be challenging if there are not the right mix of skills and attributes on the team someone has to be responsible for finances!
What:	An informal space for women and/or women's groups to meet - run on a self-organised / volunteer basis
When:	Weekend afternoons [most popular time across all respondents]. Weekday early evenings [mainly women aged 18-35]. Weekday afternoons [mainly women aged 66+]
Resource implications for pilot:	Budget to cover:- Centre/ volunteer coordination- Booking system- Space hire- Any additional equipment to make the space more welcoming and usable- if not already! (e.g.: sofas / kettle / microwave / posters)- Refreshments-Marketing and comms.
Possible risks:	Keyholder system?
Any other considerations:	Start small and develop trust. Needs to be fully disabled accessible. Needs to have facilities for making drinks/ heating food. Marketing well so that it feels accessible to all groups. Terms and conditions of usage - will all women's groups have access or will there be conditions set (e.g.: all groups must be trans inclusive?). Impact of terms & conditions of usage on host organisation. Desire for permanence & reliability amongst women means aim should be a regular, reliable location
Longer term impact of piloting this:	Pilot identifies that it is a needed and used resource

B. Regular hosted drop-in space

What:	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.
Of interest to particular demographic groups?	See below (when)
Additional comments from participants:	Values of the space that the women dreamt of: Warm welcome. Reflects them - diversity & difference is present from the minute they walk through the door (e.g. pictures on walls, staff members). Owned & led by all those who use it, rather than full of services & led by professionals honour experts by lived experience. Acknowledgement of trauma & fully trauma-trained staff team (including cleaners etc.). Facilitates community. Where they can access: health & wellbeing supporting formation about services & critically: support to access
Where:	Could potentially happen in any community space Could be trialled in the city centre
Other organisations/information to consider:	Any existing community space either within the city centre and/or in community buildings across the city.
When:	Weekend afternoons [most popular time across all respondents]. Weekday early evenings [mainly women aged 18-35]. Weekday afternoons [mainly women aged 66+]
Resource implications for pilot:	Budget to cover: Any staff time required. Coordination across WGAL members to understand services offered & how to access them. Information on wider services available to women in Leeds. Any additional equipment to make the space more welcoming and usable - if not already! [e.g.: sofa's / kettle / microwave / posters]. Refreshments Marketing and comms Staff time to monitor the pilot - what works/doesn't work
Possible risks:	Desire for permanence & reliability amongst women means aim should be a regular, reliable offer
Any other considerations:	Welcome: women need to be welcomed and hosted in the space. Staff & volunteer training & support. Safety. Physical accessibility. Size of venue to accommodate drop in & groups
Longer term impact of piloting this:	Pilot identifies that it is a needed and used resource

C. Pop ups in local communities

What:	Disseminate findings to existing community organisations & encourage/support provision in response. Might include: One-off events. Training on issues affecting women. Health and wellbeing activities. Exhibitions/ cultural events. Ongoing meet-ups / groups
Of interest to particular demographic groups?	See below [when]
Additional comments from participants:	Could like to a hub and spoke model.
Where:	In any existing community spaces to expand access to women-only spaces - could include WGAL members opening up their spaces to new groups of women.
Other organisations/information to consider:	Leeds Community Anchor Network. Leeds Green Activity Providers Network. Other community organisations operating from buildings in Leeds' communities. Shared learning from Warmer Spaces initiative
When:	Weekend afternoon [most popular time across all respondents]. Weekday early evenings [mainly women aged 18-35]. Weekday afternoons [mainly women aged 66+]
Resources required for pilot:	Further information gathering on what training women would like to engage with as a priority and/or ask pop-ups to pilot & feed back data. Staff time to promote/disseminate findings from this feasibility study and raise awareness of desire for this & liaison with other organisations. Staff time to monitor the pilot - what works/doesn't work. Marketing and comms budget/resources
Possible risks:	None that wouldn't be covered under a regular risk register for an event / group / activities. Demand for out of hours provision from women compared to availability to deliver
Any other considerations:	Passing on information on safety, access and inclusion from feasibility study to local providers. Communicating opportunities back to feasibility study participants and the wider women's community
Longer term impact of piloting this:	Requesting feedback from participating organisations to WFL e.g. number of participants, demographics, popular/unpopular activities. Increasing the range of activities that women can participate in across the city

D. Conference/workshops/arts/cultural events

What:	Disseminate findings to raise awareness that there is demand for this and encourage a range of organisations to deliver
Of interest to particular demographic groups?	All respondents - but especially racially minoritised respondents
Additional comments from participants:	This was the service/activity that respondents scored the highest for 'likely' or 'extremely likely' to access, both for all respondents & for racially minoritised respondents.
Where:	In existing community, arts & cultural venues across the city
Other organisations/ information to consider:	Community venues. Existing arts organisations/venues
When:	As appropriate
Resources required for pilot:	Staff capacity (within WFL) to undertake the piece of work
Possible risks:	None that wouldn't be covered under a regular risk register for an event / group / activities
Any other considerations:	Clear outline of relevant requirements around safety & access
Longer term impact of piloting this:	Existing spaces in the city could offer more women-only spaces

E. Training for organisations on issues that affect women

What:	Offer training & build capacity of organisations to understand & better respond to issues affecting women, both in their own workforce & more widely
Of interest to particular demographic groups?	All respondents - but especially racially minoritised respondents
Additional comments from participants:	This was the third to highest response for respondents with a disability/ long term health condition
Where:	As appropriate
Other organisations/information to consider:	All WGAL members Any organisations offering specialist training on relevant issues
When:	As appropriate
Resources required for pilot:	Staff budget to coordinate. Marketing and comms resource (both to promote existing training offered by WGAL members, other organisations & creating new opportunities) Trainer fees to create new content
Possible risks:	Under funding of public/Third sector means lack of time/ resource for attending training
Any other considerations:	
Longer term impact of piloting this:	Increased body of potential allies to support movement building / Women Friendly Leeds Data from feedback and case studies feed into future work

F. Increasing resources & promoting access to existing counselling & therapy services

What:	Expanding the existing access to counselling & therapy
Of interest to particular demographic groups?	All respondents - but especially women with disabilities
Additional comments from participants:	Access to counselling or therapy received the highest response rate in every respondent category.
Where:	In an existing space/ organisation
Other organisations/information to consider:	WGAL organisations that offers counselling & therapy. Leeds' Phoenix Wellbeing Service (cf demand for holistic & wellbeing therapies) Black Minds Matters. The Black, African and Asian Therapy Network. Leeds Mind
When:	As flexible as possible to respond to demand
Resources required for pilot:	Need for additional resources to deliver additional support to respond to demand - potential support to develop fundraising capacity to increase services within WCTS. Scoping work on services are free/low cost (including regional & national services that offer online support) Targeted promotion of existing services
Any other considerations:	
Possible risks:	Increasing demand without resources to meet that demand, putting women's organisations under even greater pressure
Longer term impact of piloting this:	Will provide further evidence of need

G. Small business support & networking

What:	Potential for the following: Incubator space at community centre. Training and skills development (women only) on running your own business at various locations. Networking opportunities - most likely city centre with active support for women to engage (e.g. travel subsidies/transport, staff support to attend)
Of interest to particular demographic groups?	Requested specifically by racially minoritised respondents
Additional comments from participants:	Notes from Sarah Longlands / CLES report: importance of addressing intersectional needs of women and of agencies working together to provide skills development, childcare, address other issues going on in a women's life 'How it would be fantastic to do something that's a trailblazer e.g. working with women in the tech companies coming to Leeds' interviewee
Where:	TBC
Other organisations/ information to consider:	Relevant WGAL members. Leeds African & Caribbean Centre. Business development: Leeds Council Chamber of Commerce, LEAN Network ³³ Potential to link with other organisations providing child care and support to help women get work-ready e.g. Smart Works Islington - every time a developer wants to build they have a policy around creating affordable workspace for local residents - leased to residents at pepper corn rates. Islington has done work to create work space for Bangladeshi women around the textile industry - out of that has grown a business community of women - from what was a social/support group initially
When:	During school hours [source: Focus Groups] Evenings and weekends [source: survey]
Resources required for pilot:	Senior staff time: To liaise & identify exact scope of pilot project (including specific localities). To liaise with relevant organisations, networks & contacts to coordinate what is available to women Monitor the pilot - what works/doesn't work
Possible risks:	Manage expectations
Any other considerations:	Participants want women-only space / training etc. Note that some women will not travel to city-centre provision. Could link with both the council's Inclusive Growth Strategy and the launch of the CLES ³⁴ report. Clear outline of relevant requirements around safety & access
Longer term impact of piloting this:	Development of body of data in relation to women and business development in order to influence economic planning in city

H. Pilot single directory for women's services across Leeds

What:	Pilot a single spreadsheet of data, which shared with all WGAL members and associated organisations/sectors
Of interest to particular demographic groups?	60% of all respondents 65%+ racially minoritised women
Additional comments from participants:	A number of women expressed the need to have more and better information on services available to women in the city.
Where:	Wherever women go to access information - in-person and on-line. Trial dissemination via Option B or C
Other organisations to consider:	All WGAL members. Cross sector partnerships & service providers. Consult with Food Aid Network to learn how their system works
When:	24/7
Resources required for pilot:	Staff time to: Consider what this might look like. Coordinate across WGAL members. First steps in collating wider information
Possible risks:	Information is quickly out of date. Puts existing services under additional pressure
Any other considerations:	Are there ways that women could access this information directly out of hours?
Longer term impact of piloting this:	Potential collation of existing databases across all sectors to produce one database that is accessible to all & promoted widely across all services

I: Increase access to women only fitness classes, sporting opportunities & gym facilities

What:	Raise awareness amongst local providers to provide more women-only gym, fitness and swimming sessions [with women-only staffing] as a business opportunity
Of interest to particular demographic groups?	In particular racially minoritised women
Additional comments from participants:	Came up in focus groups where women had used multi-sex facilities and not had a good experience.
Where:	Citywide facilities
Other organisations to consider:	Local authority fitness centres. Private gyms. Community facilities Community groups & organisations NHS
When:	As required
Resources required for pilot:	Staff time to: Develop a strong business case & clear messaging on benefits for women & for providers Liaise with providers & explore opportunities. Liaise with relevant organisations, networks & contacts to coordinate what is available to women. Promote any existing provision & new opportunities to WGAL, organisations & groups across Leeds. Monitor the pilot - what works/doesn't work
Possible risks:	Existing providers do not take on need to have women-only staff and/or to enforce women-only access
Any other considerations:	There may be a need for closed trans-only sessions also
Longer term impact of piloting this:	That services are well used which evidences demand & this leads to extending women-only provision across the city

J: Pop-up services & activities in communities, including the city centre, to trial and develop a business case for further funding

What:	Pilot pop up access to services (e.g. 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
Of interest to particular demographic groups?	The most popular option for WGAL members - but also see Options A,B & C
Additional comments from participants:	We need to be ambitious - Leeds needs a women's centre and i don't think the other options provide that
Where:	TBC
Other organisations to consider:	WGAL members who need to provide leadership and support to make this happen
When:	TBC
Resources required for pilot:	Funding for: premises activities coordination, equipment.
Possible risks:	As for options A,B & C Lack of leadership from WGAL members
Any other considerations:	
Longer term impact of piloting this:	Evidence of need

8. Design workshop with WGAL leaders

All WGAL leaders were invited to a 2.5 hours workshop to consider the highlighted findings and suggested options. A paper covering interim findings was circulated to WGAL leaders in advance of a final design workshop.³⁵ This included the nine suggested options that could be piloted, based on the findings of the engagement methods.

10 of the 12 WGAL member organisations were present, along with the feasibility study commissioning team from WFL.

Nine options were outlined in the paper, which it was suggested were not mutually exclusive but could be run concurrently depending on resource & capacity. They were:

A - Self-managed space with on-line booking system

B - Regular hosted drop-in space

C - Pop ups in local communities

D - Conference/workshops/arts/cultural events

E - Training for organisations on issues that affect women

F - Increasing resources & promoting access to existing counselling & therapy services

G - Small business support & networking

H - Pilot single directory for women's services across Leeds

I - Increase access to women only fitness classes, sporting opportunities & gym facilities

There was an opportunity for everyone present to ask clarifying questions, reflect together on the report, suggest additional options & then vote on their organisation's preferred options. Below is a summary of the discussion:

- WGAL organisations' experience of the importance of offering childcare to make activities & services accessible
- All the options feel like a 'sticking plaster' & what we need to do is find funding for Women Friendly Leeds which people around the country are looking at & learning from (which runs out in December 2024)
- Whatever happens should be under the Women Friendly Leeds banner
- £15,000 will be quickly spent - desire to host a pilot that will create lasting impact
- That the purpose of the pilot should be to create a business case for what comes next
- Vision for a physical space in the city centre
- What is currently happening least that women want to see happen in the city (from findings) & how can innovative options be found in response?
- How can we measure success?
- Are we managing expectations?

- All WGAL organisations have their own evidence base for need, but is this an opportunity to develop an evidence base together?
- Do we want to prioritise those women who aren't accessing any WGAL services?
- Lots of women who do use WGAL services would like a women's centre
- Could a mobile bus visit local communities?
- Some of the options are likely to cost more than £15,000 to deliver
- WFL is for all women, not just those who access WGAL member organisations' services
- It was noted that four of the organisations operate from city centre spaces & that Together Women host activities accessible to all women throughout the week
- One option presented in the paper had suggested that one WGAL organisation in particular should receive funds - this was objected to & has since been removed

Further Options developed

1. Developing further research building on the feasibility study & doing some 'pop ups' & signposting
2. Plan a pilot together that we can try, which builds an evidence base for future fundraising
3. Pilot 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 a mobile bus, or existing community spaces)
4. Put £15,000 into fundraising for WFL's sustainability beyond 2024
5. Give Together Women the funding to support their new city centre base which could include more 'women's centre space'

Some options were then clustered together in response to participants' suggestions. Each organisation was given three votes for the options they would most like to see pursued (green) & three votes for the options they feel definitely shouldn't be pursued (red). The final options voted on with their corresponding votes were as follows:

Option:	Description:	NO	YES
A	Self-managed space with on-line booking system	5	
B	Regular hosted drop-in space		6
C	Pop ups in local communities		8
D	Conference/workshops/arts/cultural events	1	
E	Training for organisations on issues that affect women	2	
F	Increasing resources & promoting access to existing counselling & therapy services	6	
G	Small business support & networking	1	1
H	Pilot single directory for women's services across Leeds	1	
I	Increase access to women only fitness classes, sporting opportunities & gym facilities	3	

Option:	Description:	NO	YES
J	Pilot 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		12
K	Put £15,000 into fundraising for WFL's sustainability beyond 2024	3	
L	Give Together Women the funding to support their new city centre base	2	1

28

It was noted that access would be a key consideration in developing a pilot pop up, with questions around if & how it would be managed, the importance of risk assessing free access & whether evidence around who is accessing would be needed to build the business case.

Offers of support from WGAL members

The final part of the workshop invited those present to indicate what (if anything) their organisations might be able to contribute to the pilot phase. Some had left by this stage so this will need to be followed up further. The following contributions were offered (notwithstanding that some women had to leave by this stage):

Role	Organisation
Occasional staff to support pop ups	Women's Health Matters, Getaway Girls, Shantona
Space at their building for a pop up	Women's Health Matters, Asha, Basis, Together Women, Shantona, Women and Family Service (after purchase complete)
Involved in planning & design of next steps	SARSVL, Basis, Nari Ekta, Getaway Girls, Shantona
Volunteers who may want to get involved	SARSVL, Nari Ekta
Encourage women who use their services to access pop ups in other parts of the city	Asha, Basis

In addition it was generally agreed that it was a good idea to share contacts & 'intelligence', for example the fact that the Playhouse is now offering free space to organisations, as they want their building to be used; connections with sexual health nurses and so on.

9. Recommendations

Our recommendations for WGAL include:

Use the information within this feasibility study to make an informed decision about what and how to pilot

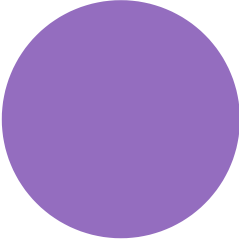
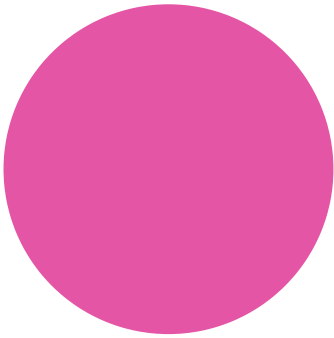
Give serious consideration to where the leadership to the next phase will come from, developing a robust steering group which has the capacity and confidence to deliver

Secure additional resources to ensure that the steering group is adequately resourced

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.

Consider how information about women's services in Leeds can be better promoted

Develop a variety of communication collateral that provides tailored information contained within this report to inform particular audiences



10. End Notes

- 1 See Appendix A: WGAL Women's Centre Commissioning brief
- 2 Some members of WGAL do have centres but these are associated with and used for service delivery & to focus on women who need their particular services, or are aimed primarily at the most vulnerable women & girls in the city.
- 3 [Population - UTLA | Leeds | Report Builder for ArcGIS](#)
- 4 [WFL is part of the Women Friendly Cities Challenge | WTC \(womentransformingcities.org\)](#)
- 5 Appendix B: Urban Catalysts submission with a detailed outline of our methodology
- 6 <https://www.solacewomensaid.org/labyrinth-project-training-and-workshops/>
- 7 [Women-and-Girls-Briefing-Report-Final- web.pdf \(tavinstitute.org\)](#)
- 8 Report by Baroness Jean Corston, 'A review of women with particular vulnerabilities in the Criminal Justice system' (published by the Home Office, 2007)
- 9 Appendix C: Examples of other UK Women's Centres
- 10 [28 community based organisations belong to the Local Community Anchor Network, many of whom have premises: Leeds Community Anchor Network - Doing Good Leeds](#)
- 11 [Women-and-Girls-Sector-Research-Mapping-Report-Final.pdf \(tnlcommunityfund.org.uk\)](#)
- 12 [WBG-REPORT-OCT-20-Case-for-Sustainable-Funding-for-Womens-Centres.pdf \(anawim.co.uk\)](#)
- 13 [Women-and-Girls-Sector-Research-Mapping-Report-Final.pdf \(tnlcommunityfund.org.uk\)](#)
- 14 [360Giving - 360Giving_\(threesixtygiving.org\)](#)
- 15 [The funding landscape for women's voluntary and community organisations in London | Women's Resource Centre \(wrc.org.uk\)](#)
- 16 [Women-and-Girls-Sector-Research-Mapping-Report-Final.pdf \(tnlcommunityfund.org.uk\)](#)
- 17 See Appendix C: Examples of other UK Women's Centres Tab 2/ Income sources
- 18 See Appendix D: List of potential funders
- 19 See Appendix E: WRC Stage 1 feasibility study
- 20 See Appendix F: WRC Stage 2 feasibility study

End Notes Cont...

- 21** They didn't have to pay rent, service charges or utilities: this still saved the landlord over £60,000 in business rates
- 22** Current service charges in Leeds city centre are around £7 per square foot. So even a relatively small 5,000 sf could amount to £35,000 per annum.
- 23** [Brighton rape crisis centre sued over refusal to offer female-only groups – Brighton and Hove News](#)
[UK Supreme Court: The Definition of Sex in the Equality Act \(crowdjustice.com\)](#)
- 24** See Appendix G: List of interviewees
- 25** [\(Che \(Cheryl\) Barnes | LinkedIn\)](#)
- 26** This approach is present in the Leeds-based Love in Care company, which operates a home care services to racially minoritised communities.
- 27** See Appendix J: List of focus groups and social groups attended
- 28** All data for Leeds is sourced from the National Census data for 2021 via the Leeds Observatory
- 29** All data for Leeds is sourced from the National Census data for 2021 via the Leeds Observatory
- 30** See Appendix P: Notes on provision of childcare
- 31** See Appendix O: Survey data: full list of responses to Q8
- 32** Participants in the options tables refers to anyone who took part in any part of the feasibility study
- 33** The LEAN Network is a business network for women run by Claire Ackers
- 34** The Centre for Local Economic Strategies report "Women's work - How gender equality can deliver stronger local economies" published 22nd March 2024
- 35** See Appendix L: Interim report provided to WGAL members

11. Appendices

- A** WGAL Women's Centre Commissioning Brief
- B** Urban Catalyst's bid to WGAL
- C** Examples of other UK Women's Centres
- D** List of potential funders
- E** WRC Feasibility study of shared premises for Women's Organisations
- F** WRC Stage 2 Feasibility Report: Financial Appraisal of 'Women's Centre of Excellence'
- G** List of interviewees
- H** Questions for semi-structured interviews with WGAL members
- I** Questions for semi-structured interviews with wider stakeholders
- J** List of Focus and social groups
- K** Hopscotch Policy
- L** Interim Report provided to WGAL members
- M** Survey questions
- N** Survey data: demographics (incl: postcode data)
- O** Survey data: full list of responses to Q8
- P** Notes on provision of childcare

About the team

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