



The need for a Women's Centre in Waltham Forest

**An evidence report by Shared Enterprise CIC
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This report was commissioned by Rooms of our Own. The report was researched and written by Liz Mackie from Shared Enterprise CIC.

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Rooms of our Own

Rooms of our Own is a social enterprise planning to build a Women's Centre in Waltham Forest. They want to run the Women's Centre as a not-for-profit business and to subsidise under-funded women's voluntary organisations with income from housing and commercial uses. For more information about Rooms of our Own please contact roomso4own@gmail.com

Shared Enterprise CIC

Shared Enterprise CIC is a social enterprise with a mission to promote equality and social inclusion. We support organisations to achieve equality and social inclusion objectives through research, evaluation and project development. For more information about Shared Enterprise please visit our website at www.sharedenterprise.org.uk

The case for women's centres in the UK

There is a growing body of evidence from across the UK which demonstrates the value and benefits of women's centres. The main points from this evidence show that:

Women-only services are lawful

The Equality Act 2010 makes clear that women-only services are legal and appropriate in certain contexts, and that it is legal and appropriate for public authorities to fund and provide women-only services.ⁱ Single-sex services are permitted where it can be shown to be the most effective way of providing those services or where the service is needed by one sex only.ⁱⁱ

Women and girls want to use women-only services

A majority of women and girls say they would like the option of using a women-only place or service. In a random sample survey of 1,000 women 56 per cent said they would choose a women-only gym over a mixed gym, and 96 per cent said women who have suffered sexual assault should have access to a women-only support service.ⁱⁱⁱ In a national survey of girls and young women aged 11 to 21, 64 per cent said they would like to spend time in a girls-only place.^{iv} Our own survey of women in Waltham Forest found that 74 per cent would be likely to use a Women's Centre if there was one in the borough.

Women-only services are cost effective

A Social Return on Investment analysis of women's voluntary organisations found that for every £1 of investment the social value created by women's organisations ranges from £5 to £11.^v A cost benefit analysis of community based services for women in the criminal justice system found that every £1 invested in women-centred alternatives to prison generates £14 worth of social value over ten years.^{vi}

Women-only services produce effective outcomes

Evaluations of women-only services report significant benefits from this approach. An impact evaluation by the New Economics Foundation concluded that 'Women's community services can significantly improve the well-being of vulnerable women.'^{vii} An evaluation of community services for women offenders by the Institute for Criminal Policy Research describes women's centres as 'viable and effective settings for providing interventions'.^{viii} An evaluation of the Calderdale Women's Centre by the University of Huddersfield concluded that the centre 'plays a key role in public service provision in Calderdale, particularly in the areas of domestic abuse, counselling, and building general well-being and community capacity amongst women living through challenging life events'.^{ix}

Women-only services are particularly important for women from minority groups

Women-only services are particularly needed and valued by minority and vulnerable communities of women, including ethnic minority women, lesbian, bisexual, older and young women, lone mothers, women suffering mental ill-health and others.^x Women-only services can provide greater empathy and support than mainstream services for women who are vulnerable or isolated or who experience the effects of discrimination.^{xi}

Women-only services help to achieve equality

The research evidence shows that women's organisations play a vital role in tackling discrimination against women.^{xii} Women in the UK face continuing inequalities across many aspects of their lives, and perhaps most starkly in terms of:

- **Violence**
The vast majority of the victims of domestic abuse, rape and sexual assault are female. There are over 1 million female victims of domestic abuse in England and Wales each year, over 300,000 women are sexually assaulted and 60,000 women are raped each year. More than one in four women in the UK experiences domestic abuse in their lifetime.^{xiii} The economic cost of violence against women in the UK is estimated to be £37.6 billion annually.^{xiv}
- **Labour market**
Women experience discrimination in the labour market in terms of opportunities and pay. Women are paid on average around 20 per cent less than men, rising to a gap of 55 per cent in the finance sector.^{xv xvi} Under-employment of women and occupational gender segregation are estimated to cost the UK economy up to £23 billion each year.^{xvii} Women with children experience additional disadvantages in the labour market: 56 per cent of working mothers are working part time, compared with 7 per cent of working fathers, and those who take time out of the labour market after having children are likely to earn less.^{xviii}
- **Genital mutilation**
An estimated 137,000 women and girls in England and Wales are likely to have undergone female genital mutilation (FGM). Between 1996 and 2010, 144,000 girls were born in England and Wales whose mothers are from FGM practising countries and who may therefore have undergone or be at risk of FGM.^{xix} A majority of the women and girls in the UK who have undergone or are at risk of FGM live in London.
- **Cuts in legal aid**
The reduction in legal support is having a major impact on access to justice for women suffering discrimination and violence. Evidence from women's organisations, reported in the national press, shows that cuts in legal support are having a 'devastating effect' on domestic abuse victims, the vast majority of which are women. Experts believe that some women will die as a result.^{xx}
- **Welfare reforms**
Welfare reforms are pushing more women into poverty and insecurity. Recent research by the University of Warwick examines the impact of the Government's public spending cuts and identifies that these are having a disproportionate effect on women in the areas of employment, housing, income and poverty, education and training, violence against women, health and social care, and access to legal advice services.^{xxi}

What do Women's Centres do?

Women's Centres provide safe, accessible and affordable space for women of **ALL** ages, backgrounds and cultures.

Women's Centres are a refuge for the many thousands of women who experience male-perpetrated violence or trauma and need space without threat or fear.

Women's Centres offer services which develop women's educational, employment, enterprise and cultural opportunities.

Women's Centres offer information, advice, counselling, self-help and therapeutic services to women who need support.

Women's Centres provide affordable childcare facilities and access to childcare which help women get back into work.

West Hampstead Women's Centre case study by Rhian Beynon

For more than 30 years, West Hampstead Women's Centre has provided a space for all women in the London borough of Camden, with a particular focus on supporting women from marginalised groups. The Centre offers a safe, supportive and flexible place for health, education and therapeutic services, meeting venues, personal development, and where women in emergency need can get crisis support.

For many women, initial contact with the Centre is through the Crisis Intervention Project which assists women facing immediate challenges in welfare benefits, money management, housing, domestic violence, mental health, job loss, and relationship problems. The support available includes a Citizens Advice surgery, legal advice, rape and sexual violence services. In 2013-14, the Crisis Intervention Project helped 341 women to deal with crisis situations, of which almost 40 per cent were Somali women. One woman who was helped by the Crisis Intervention Project told the Centre *"I was given understanding, a feeling of ease and comfort. I felt I could express what I'd been hiding and really figure out what I need to do to put my life back on track."*

Once out of crisis, many women make use of the longer term opportunities offered through the Centre, for example by joining the Somali Women's Group. In 2013-14, 49 women from this group gained NVQ qualifications in Health & Social Care and 27 then went on to paid jobs in the care sector. Similarly, the Asian Women's Group, with a current membership of 53 women, is tailored to the needs of its members who are mostly older women, many of whom are isolated and have long term conditions which affect their physical or mental wellbeing. This group took a crochet course and then used these skills to make and sell items, raising almost £400 in funding. Other well-used services at the Centre include health education, exercise classes, and a peer support group for women with cancer.

Perhaps the most inspiring aspect of West Hampstead Women's Centre is the many women who give back to the Centre as volunteers. More than 50 volunteers have been involved with the Centre in roles which include reception duties, skills tutoring and gardening. The Centre estimates that in one six-month period volunteers may have contributed more than £16,000 worth of time and skills. Centre Manager Ruskshana Chisti says: *"Volunteers play a vital role in the development and operation of the Centre. In return, they are able to learn new skills, increase their confidence and are helped to gain qualifications. They are a powerful source of inspiration and their contribution is invaluable to the Centre and to the community as a whole."*

Women in Waltham Forest

About 130,000 women and girls live in Waltham Forest, slightly more than half the borough population.

For the communities that are most likely to need and benefit from the support of a Women's Centre in the borough, the key statistics for Waltham Forest are:

Migrant women

Almost 40 per cent of the women living in Waltham Forest were born outside the UK.

Ethnic minority women

Two thirds (64%) of the women in Waltham Forest belong to a minority ethnic group (i.e. an ethnic group other than White British).

Lone parents

There are 8,885 lone parent households in Waltham Forest, of which 93 per cent are headed by women. Over 4,000 (54%) female lone parents in the borough were not in employment at the time of the 2011 Census.

Carers

More than 12,000 women in Waltham Forest provide unpaid care. Of all those in the borough providing unpaid care, 56 per cent are women. Of those in the borough who provide full time unpaid care (i.e. more than 50 hours per week), 61 per cent are women.

Health and disability

More than 20,000, or 16 per cent of the women in the borough report that their day to day activities are limited by long term health problems or disability. Of all those in the borough whose day to day activities are limited by ill health or disability, 55 per cent are women.

Domestic violence

The Metropolitan Police recorded 4,337 domestic violence incidents in Waltham Forest in 2012.^{xxii}

Employees

At 61 per cent, the employment rate for women in Waltham Forest is lower than for women in London (63%), outer London (64%) and England (67%).

Entrepreneurs

There were 8,265 active businesses in Waltham Forest in 2012. If the borough follows the national trend, around 17 per cent of business owners will be women, indicating that around 1,500 businesses in the borough are owned by women.^{xxiii}

Sexual violence and abuse

FGM campaigners consider that Waltham Forest has a high prevalence of women and girls who are at risk from FGM.^{xxiv}

The case for a women's centre in Waltham Forest

There is strong support for a women's centre in Waltham Forest; 93 per cent of Waltham Forest women who responded to our survey would welcome a women's centre in the borough and 74 per cent would be likely to use it.

We also collected views from 58 people representing 48 voluntary and community organisations which between them provide support to tens of thousands of women in Waltham Forest. Ninety three per cent would welcome a women's centre in the borough and 86 per cent said their organisation or service users would be likely to use it. These organisations believe there are gaps in current provision for women and girls within the borough which could be filled by the proposed Women's Centre. They consider that the women and girls in Waltham Forest women who are most in need of a women-only space are: women who have been subject to domestic violence, rape, sexual assault and other forms of abuse; homeless women; and girls and young women.

Through a series of interviews with organisations working with women in Waltham Forest, we found an overwhelmingly positive view of the proposal for a women's centre in the borough, including from organisations providing services to girls and young women, carers, mothers, black and minority ethnic women, women involved in creative arts and business, and women who are campaigning against sexual violence and FGM. These organisations consider that a women's centre in Waltham Forest will promote:

Inclusivity for women across all ages, cultures and backgrounds. A centre which is only for women means that **all** women and girls can participate, including those who are afraid to, unable to, or prefer not to take part in mixed-sex activities. Women's Centres are the only place where women from cultures which prohibit contact with male strangers are able to meet and socialise with women from other cultural groups.

New opportunities for individuals and organisations. A women's centre will open up opportunities for organisations which are currently hampered by a lack of space to run activities and provide services. For example, Waltham Forest is under-represented within national girl guiding provision as there are not enough suitable spaces to run girl guide units in the borough. A Women's Centre will also provide new opportunities through networking, mentoring and peer support for women starting their own businesses.

Accessibility to services, by providing an affordable venue which women and girls can use to run events, meetings and services. A Women's Centre would increase access to services for women by providing a focal point for information and advice about where they can go for help and support.

Collaboration between organisations in the borough, by providing a place where they can meet, network, share ideas, exchange information and co-locate services.

Joined up services for women, by enabling more effective sign posting and referral of women from one service to another, and by reducing the risks of women getting lost in the gaps between services.

Sustainability, particularly for smaller groups which struggle to secure funding. A Women's Centre will provide affordable space for small and unfunded groups, also helping to reduce organisational costs by sharing resources.

METHODOLOGY

This research was carried out using the following methods:

- A review of the available literature on the need for and benefits from women's centres in the UK. This literature is detailed in the REFERENCES section.
- Collecting available statistical information about women in Waltham Forest. The main sources of statistical data were the 2011 Census (accessed via www.nomis.co.uk) and the Greater London Authority DataStore (<http://data.london.gov.uk/>).
- Interviews with 11 organisations which provide services to women in Waltham Forest and two Women's Centres in other London boroughs. The organisations interviewed are detailed in the INTERVIEWEES section.
- An on-line survey of voluntary and community organisations in Waltham Forest. An invitation to complete the on-line survey was sent via Voluntary Action Waltham Forest to voluntary and community organisations in their database. The survey was open for responses in November and December 2014. This survey received responses from 46 individuals on behalf of 38 organisations. The full survey results are available from Rooms of our Own on request.
- An on-line survey of women in Waltham Forest. The survey used a network sampling method to reach respondents. All women's organisations in the borough were contacted and asked to forward the survey invitation to their members; leaflets were left in community centres and cafes; the survey invitation was shared via social media. The survey was open for responses from November 2014 to January 2015. This survey received responses from 114 women. The full survey results are available from Rooms of our Own on request.

INTERVIEWEES

Name	Organisation	Main group of women supported	Date of interview
Charlie Parish & Pam Bollen	Girlguiding	Girls and young women aged 18 to 25	19/11/14
Angela Hicks	Mothers Hub	Mothers	19/11/14
Jo Sealy	To-Market	Business women	20/11/14
Nadia Baksh	Waltham Forest Women's Network	Women in Waltham Forest	24/11/14
Shaminder Ubhi	Ashiana	BAME women	24/11/14
Jacky Bergman	Stow Roses	Women in Waltham Forest	25/11/14
Shenaz	Waltham Forest Carers Association	Carers	26/11/14
Chris Casey	The Haven	Women and girls who have experienced any form of sexual violence	27/11/14
Carla Cruz	All My Independent Women	Artists	1/12/14
Jo Bardsley	Lesbian Mothers Group	Lesbian mothers	7/12/14
Hibo Wadere	Independent volunteer	Women and girls at risk of female genital mutilation	10/12/14
Jane Holgate	Sunstone Women Community Group	Women in Hackney	27/1/15
Rukshana Chishti	West Hampstead Women's Centre	Women in Camden	2/2/15

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