

Commissioning with compassion and conviction- a consultation to shape the recommissioning of women services

This paper summarises the main learning and insight gathered from a wide range of women’s organisations and from women directly.

The [full report](#) contains a wealth of rich insight, case studies and a detailed analysis of the interviews, focus groups and survey responses that were received. The report highlights a series of recommendations for commissioners to consider as part of the commissioning process and to consider for inclusion within the specification.

Context

Support services for women are due to be recommissioned by GMCA. As part of the ongoing consultation and engagement, GMCA commissioned 10GM to seek the voice of women and women’s organisations. The GMCA were keen to hear from women who might be considered ‘vulnerable and marginalised’, who may or may not have accessed current services in recent years and who have potentially had less opportunity to feed into consultations to date.

For the purpose of this work ‘vulnerable and marginalised women’ were defined by the GMCA as *‘women who are accessing multiple services or need to be accessing multiple services and at risk of being in contact with justice services as either a perpetrator or a victim’*.

Flourish Together CIC were commissioned by 10GM to carry out this work. They are an impartial organisation (who don’t deliver women’s services) and have strong trusted networks across strategic, community-led and thematic groups.

Many of the themes identified by the women and women’s organisations are not new. To retain the trust of partners and avoid ‘consultation fatigue’, it will be important to consider this report alongside the learning and recommendations of pre-existing local research and insight listed in Appendix E.

Methodology and approach

Between August and September 2020, Flourish CIC conducted 30 interviews, surveys (with 79 responses), and 13 focus groups. In total over 200 people engaged in this consultation from 80 organisations and the consultation reached and included women from across all 10 boroughs of Greater Manchester.

The following people, groups and organisations participated in the research:

- Consultation and interviews with established VCSE Women’s Support orgs and a call out through their networks to complete a survey.
- Consultation, interviews, and survey sharing with smaller grassroots Women’s Support organisations and a call out through their networks to complete a survey
- Consultation with women with lived experience via one-to-one interviews, focus groups and via a survey
- Consultation, interviews, and survey with Housing Providers providing specialist accommodation and a call out through their networks to complete a survey

- Consultation and interviews with organisations supporting men and wider family members to feed into wider observations, perspectives and discussion

A particular strength of this insight is the breadth of diverse views. Over 50% of people engaged in this consultation were women who have direct personal experience of needing to access support. 55 women with lived experience were involved as part of interviews and focus groups, 128 people engaged through the focus groups of which 30% were from a Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic Community. 8 out of 13 focus groups had women from Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic Communities, several had those from had LGBTQ+ communities represented and over half of those involved in focus groups were ‘Experts with Lived Experience.’

Key findings

There is a significant strength of feeling from women and from women’s organisations that it is time for a step change in the approach to commissioning and bold approaches are needed to create the shared and desired outcomes. Detailed analysis of the responses gathered have led to the following pinch points that need to be considered in future commissioning arrangements.

Women and women’s organisations also had a clear vision of how things could be different:

Current state / ‘pinch points’	Future state
Disjointed commissioning arrangements and geographical variation leads to silo working amongst providers	Joint commissioning arrangements in place between GM and LA leads to more joined up offer for women, with less geographical variation
Strict eligibility leads to inability to provide holistic or sufficient level of prevention activity	Any women that needs support, at whatever part of their journey, can access this. More women are helped earlier preventing personal distress and reducing demand on acute higher intensity work.
Under investment in women’s services leads to not enough women being able to access what they need, when they need it. A mistrust and fatigue which has built over time which has led to fragmented services and adds to silo working and competition.	A partnership with commissioners, joint investment and system-wide support to access resources leads to a more responsive service for women
Well established, VCSE sector led provision brings in additional resources but leaves some organisations vulnerable and uses significant resources to ensure organisational sustainability	Groups, organisations and networks funded to work together creates a more sustainable sector that recognised the breadth of the ecosystem that is its strength.
Some women struggle to know where and how to access the support they need as there are multiple access points, inconsistency of the offer due to short term funding and no system-wide coordination mechanisms	Investment in the strategic development of the women’s VCSE sector strategic enables the establishment of well understood pathways to support and means the help that’s available is easier to understand and to access.
The offer for women facing acute needs and for communities of identity in particular; BAME, LGBTQ+, young women and women with disabilities in under-developed.	The offer for women can respond to individual needs and the breadth of the provision is rich and diverse to meet the needs of all women.

The impact of non-gendered services is not well understood across the system.	Increased awareness of the GM system, training and support in place leads to a better understanding of the needs of women and better outcomes for women in GM.
<p>Women who access and experience the services aren't able to meaningfully and consistently shape the offer.</p> <p>There is a diverse range of experience and expertise from women, particularly from those who identify as form a community of identity that is not being recognised.</p>	The experiences of a diverse range of women are valued and lead to a responsive and inclusive offer.

What women say a good service looks like

- Feeling valued, by compassionate empathetic, non-judgemental staff
- Great communication in a language they understand and way they can access
- Appropriate triage of support needs and fast tracking to therapeutic and psychological support where that is needed
- Peer support has been a lifeline to many, helped them find their own solutions, build friendships, find the right support and make progress
- Good quality correct information - without this there is much at stake (losing children/housing/benefits/rights to remain/ lack of legal support/ ongoing trauma)
- Just in time support - quick referrals and quick action otherwise people disengage and/or spiral into further difficulties
- Feeling deeply listened to with respect
- People centred / holistic services
- Having ongoing, consistent support with a key contact person for the long term, who can act as an advocate, motivator, and champion for them, when everyone else (sometimes including themselves) has given up
- Access to support sooner or at a younger age
- Accessing to resources locally as they have no resources to travel
- Translated information and help to overcome language barriers
- Asks for info once and doesn't make people repeat themselves and trigger traumatic experiences
- Share reports and information about service users with them, so that they are able to amend/ input into this and help report on progress they make

Case studies from women who have used women's services and the full analysis of the survey findings can be found in the full report.

Summary of recommendations

The following are suggestions to be considered when commissioning women's support services:

Apply the principles of the [GM VCSE Commissioning framework](#) as a guide to good commissioning. Use light touch procurement routes to fund organisations, using all opportunities available including grants in order that you commission with grass roots and established organisations

Pool resources from across the system to commission the maximum amount of provision possible, over the longest term, and consider the use of pilot and review phases to respond to community need and building in flexibility for adaptations to the offer over time.

Create commissioner and provider partnerships that foster the development of relationships and shared risk and opportunity, which maximise the potential for real innovation and the ability to strengthen and sustain services to build legacy. Celebrate and recognise the diverse and rich services and expertise which exist across the VCSE Women's Support Sector. Map and understand the social value being sourced, invested and created by the women's support sector. Consider how an alliance or overarching network could support organisations to find their place in the ecosystem, plus promote and strengthen individual organisations.

Fund a combination of prevention and higher intensity services across a wider range of organisations. Create opportunities within the commissioning process for dialogue between a range of generalist and specialist organisation. Investment in the rich networks of peer support (which exist across the majority of agencies) to strengthen both preventative interventions and follow on/wellbeing support.

Fund a diverse range of women's organisations to work together to co-create joint systems, process, and access points. Help women find the nearest 'Front Door' to access a light touch triage services, in a language they understand to ensure women access support appropriate to their needs. Systems and process must recognise that when going through a crisis woman may not have the resources or ability to travel and that localised support is often preferred. Invest in agencies to carry out effective and consistent impact and value measurement.

Commission activity from within the VCSE sector that increases awareness of the need for gendered services and develops system-wide training that listens to and learns from the experiences of women. This is a misunderstood field and there is a lack of consistency across boroughs in endorsing and achieving this. Investing in expertise and the VCSE sector directly to improve awareness and impact of gendered approaches will build trust, consistency and enhanced results.

Fund the development of a constructive challenge and co-design space for women who experience the services to bring real time insight and authenticity to the commissioning and service design processes. The scope of this could include – test the recommendations in this report and ensure they are actioned, including that the VCSE Commissioning framework principles are applied, be an active partner in the commissioning selection, provide a consultation and research function for future reviews, and contributing to system-wide training and system change projects.

More details

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