



# WOMEN MAKING CHANGES PROJECT: EVALUATION SUMMARY

*“I couldn’t bear to look at myself...I now look in the mirror... know it was not my fault. I was treated like a human being, they listened to me and made me feel ok”*

July 2021

Sarah Frost and Dr. Sarah Lloyd



## Introduction

This independent summary evaluation report of the Women Making Changes (WMC) project presents the headline findings from the evaluation activity undertaken between August 2017 and April 2021. This qualitative evaluation shows the difference made to women accessing the WMC project and explores the benefits to partner agencies and wider stakeholders.

The evaluation work has been guided by a Theory of Change (ToC) for the WMC project, developed in October 2017. The final project evaluation report draws on the data previously reported in the three interim evaluation reports produced. In summary the data for the evaluation came from: Interviews with 30 women accessing the project; Case studies of 82 women accessing the project collected by the project workers; Interviews with WMC project staff at three time points; Interviews with project partners at two time points; Interviews with 7 wider stakeholders (including housing support; DV support, social prescribing; family intervention work and the police).

## Background

The “Women Making Changes” project is delivered by a partnership consisting of five organisations:

- a) WomenCentre Limited (Lead Partner)
- b) Age UK Calderdale and Kirklees
- c) Christians Together Calderdale
- d) Citizens Advice Calderdale
- e) St. Augustine’s Centre

The overall aim of the WMC project is to help vulnerable and marginalised women in Calderdale have financial security, suitable accommodation, and social support to live better lives and avoid future hardship crises. Target groups include women with poor mental health, women experiencing domestic abuse, women with physical disabilities/sensory impairments, older women, economic migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, and women living in rural areas. The project has supported a total of 316 women over the 5 year duration.

The project employs three part-time workers and a Project Manager, with operational, safeguarding, financial, contractual and reporting support provided by WomenCentre’s Senior Management team. Project workers provide support and advice to women, primarily at WomenCentre (WC) but also in other settings. The original outcomes of the WMC project as agreed with the funder, the National Lottery Community Fund (NLCF), are in box 1 below.

### Box 1: Outcomes for WMC project as agreed with NLCF

- a) People who have experienced hardship crisis are better able to improve their circumstances.
- b) People who are at high risk of experiencing hardship crisis are better able to plan for the future.
- c) Those experiencing or who are at high risk of experiencing hardship crises have a stronger, more collective voice to better shape a response to their issues.
- d) Organisations are better able to support people to effectively tackle hardship through sharing learning and evidence.

## Issues faced by women

Women accessing WMC are dealing with a range of complex and often long-term issues, with most experiencing multiple interrelated issues. Many of the issues faced by women accessing the project could be linked to traumatic life experiences in childhood, followed by other often chronic traumatic experiences in adulthood (e.g. domestic abuse, poverty, losing a child to care). Table 1 provides some examples of the range of the challenges and issues women accessing WMC were facing.

<b>Mental Health:</b> Emotional impact of domestic abuse; Experience of child sexual abuse/exploitation; Loss of confidence and self-esteem; PTSD; Bi-polar; Guilt; Depression; Anxiety and stress; Loneliness; Despair/no hope; Breakdowns; Suicidal ideation or attempts; Misdiagnosis of mental health issues.
<b>Health &amp; Wellbeing:</b> Physical impact of domestic abuse / domestic violence; Tiredness; Hunger; Not looking after themselves; Learning difficulties; Alcohol/drug addiction dependency; Gambling; Being in/out of rehab; Living with another addict; General health problems.
<b>Finance:</b> Living in poverty - not having enough money to live on; Not knowing how to budget / plan spending; Unemployment /struggling to find work; Benefits cut; Debt issues/bills and avoiding dealing with them; Not understanding benefits processes, Debt and hardship due to domestic abuse.
<b>Relationships / Family:</b> Difficult family relationships / Chaotic family background; Being a single parent; Being a carer; Children in care/adopted or estranged; Have children who are depressed/suicidal; Have children who are having problems at school; Domestic abuse /violence; Lack of family support; Been in prison; Poor parenting of the women when she was a child.
<b>Accommodation / Housing:</b> Homeless or at risk of homelessness; Lack of housing; Living in temporary and unsuitable accommodation; rent not affordable; risk of eviction; Harassment from neighbours Not having enough money to pay the bond (for rental property); Rent arrears; Problems with neighbours (including assaults).
<b>Practical needs:</b> No access to gas/electricity; Lack of food/clothes/toiletries/school uniforms/household goods/ furniture; Need help to fill in forms/paperwork; No access to the internet or phone.
<b>Legal:</b> Courts involved with domestic abuse cases; Immigration issues; Asylum issues-claims and appeals; Facing death if returned to home country; Appeals, especially for benefits; Children being removed; Need help dealing with solicitors.

## What women value about the WMC project

When asked what they valued about the WMC project, women mentioned two main areas: The WomenCentre setting and WMC workers.

**The WomenCentre setting** was viewed as a welcoming, safe, inclusive, women-only, caring environment that took a holistic approach to working with women. WomenCentre staff were seen as compassionate, caring, and kind.

For some women, engaging with the Women's Centre was a significant step in itself that should not be underestimated.

*"If it wasn't for this place, there would be a lot of people in a wrecky, horrible place, it is salvation, sanctuary, it makes a lot of difference, my quality of life is better cos of [the workers], you have back up and you are not on your own...it's like a massive burden has been lifted, it's easier to deal with" (W17)*



b) Women need ongoing support, often when there are underlying and significant mental health difficulties, learning needs or unaddressed trauma.

The **continuity of care and value of the gendered and holistic approach** taken by WMC, seeing the woman as a whole and not working on issues in silos, is seen of great value to the women.

#### **WMC Workers Approach: Eight common features**

1. Flexible location and range of access points
2. Persistence and determination
3. Being flexible and reactive to needs
4. Advocacy role
5. Liaison with agencies on behalf of women
6. Being positive and motivational
7. Offering opportunities for co-production
8. Focusing on longer term engagement and change

*“All the other services I’ve ever used look at problems in isolation, and address them in isolation too... which never works because all my difficult circumstances have always fed into each other and made the others harder to escape from.” (W13)*

*“We can have conversations with women that no one else has. Who else will do that? They don’t have the time” (Worker)*

*“It’s a rollercoaster...there is no planning...you have to meet the immediate need.” (Worker)*

**The role of a WMC worker is challenging** - dealing with women in complex and chaotic circumstances is stressful and emotionally draining. Workers are hard pushed for time - ‘doing a full-time job in part-time hours. Demand and need are high - workers may be ‘juggling’ a number of women simultaneously because there is a risk that they won’t come back if they are sent away. While workers do all they can to support the women, the WMC team has expressed significant concerns around the level of need and the fact that there isn’t enough support available. Despite these pressures, all workers reported that **the role was rewarding**.

The WMC team has consistently worked well together, despite staffing changes and the added pressure of Covid-19. It is a supportive environment to work in and a positive team to be part of - there was a feeling from workers that, *“everyone supports each other.”*

*“Plenty of good stuff comes out of it...the thanks you get...you give them a duvet and you’d think they had won the lottery...getting someone gas and electric makes a difference” (Worker)*

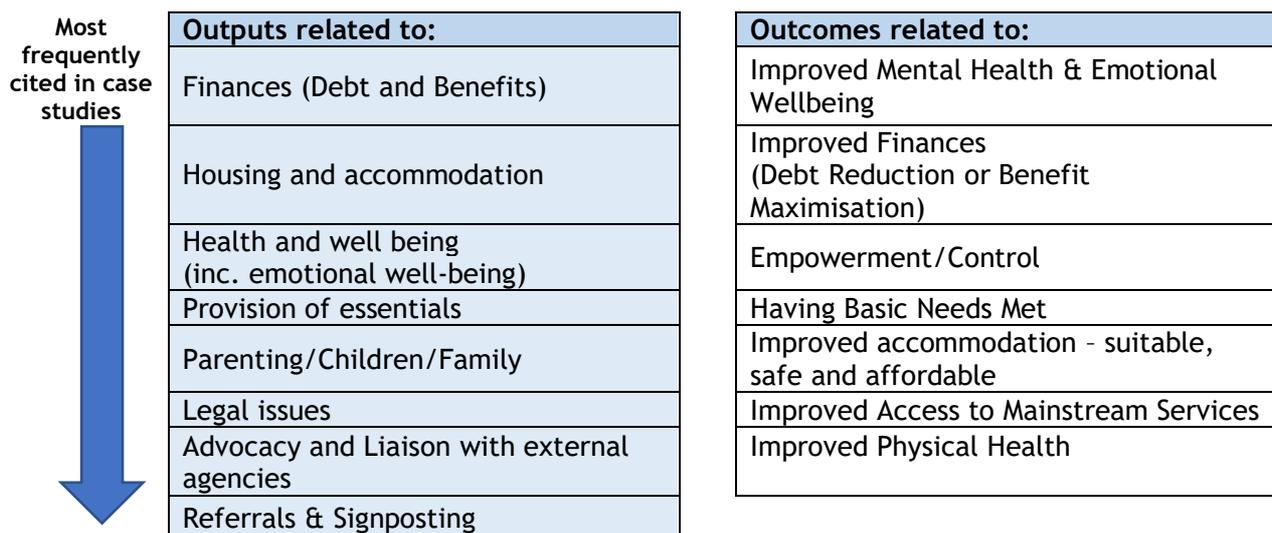
#### **Outcomes for women**

A qualitative analysis of 82 case studies shows a wide range of actions and activities (outputs) undertaken by workers, related to a number of areas or themes (see Fig:2). The case study analysis also shows a range of outcomes reported for women accessing the WMC project which relate to the following eight themes:

- Basic/Essential Needs Met e.g. gas, electricity, food, phones, data
- Improved Mental Health & Emotional Wellbeing
- Improved Physical Health

- Improved Financial Management - Debt Reduction
- Improved Finances - Benefit Maximisation
- Improved Accommodation Status - suitable, safe, and affordable
- Improved Access to Mainstream Services
- Increased Empowerment - Agency, Choice & Control

**Fig 2: Themes of Outputs and Outcomes Reported in Case Studies of 82 Women**



NB: Examples of specific outputs and outcomes are listed in the main report.

### Challenges to achieving outcomes

The data highlighted a range of challenges impacting the work of the project and the ability to achieve the intended outcomes for the women (see Fig:3). Some of these related to the women’s situations and some to the wider system.

**Fig.3: Challenges to achieving outcomes**



## Work with Partners

Engagement with the **five partner agencies** has not gone as originally planned. Those partners who have been actively engaged are broadly positive about the partnership and the project's work. In summary, the benefits of working in partnership identified are:

- Increased the reach of women supported (via partners)
- Increased partners knowledge of the issues women face
- Increased awareness of (and access to) the support WMC and WC can offer
- Partners valued support, advice and expertise from WMC staff
- Partners feeling that there is a better chance of solving issues for and with women
- Partners valued having access to a women's only space as a resource
- Increased women's understanding of other support organisations

One partner commented that they are no longer in 'rescue mode' but are more strategic in their response to service users because of their learning from the project.

Some challenges to working in partnership have been:

- Lack of continuity of staff in partner organisations
- Limited resources available to engage in partnership working
- Differences in culture and approach of some partner agencies
- Low levels of referrals to WMC from some partners

## Stakeholder Views

Wider stakeholders and referring agencies value WMC as a standout, trusted, respected, flexible and responsive service which understands women's multiple and complex issues and has efficient and effective referral and communication mechanisms. WMC staff are viewed as supportive, passionate, flexible and dedicated.

*"What [worker] has done, I would never have been able to do in this short period of time by myself...it's given a massive chance to these children to have a safe, happy life". S6*

In addition, stakeholders felt that:

- WMC is really needed - if it weren't there, it would leave a huge gap for women and nowhere for stakeholders to refer them to.
- WMC eases the workload of other services, giving stakeholders peace of mind and adds value in Calderdale.
- WomenCentre is a safe and comfortable place for women and workers - WMC staff know what women need and can get to the root of the issues.
- WMC offers practical support and provides for essential needs for women. It is well connected and knows where to signpost women to.
- WMC helps to empower women

## Conclusions

- WMC delivers a unique, feminist, specialist, and much-needed service for women facing multiple and complex issues.
- WMC is hugely valuable to other agencies, recognising and addressing barriers many women face in accessing other services.
- WMC workers are central to the project's success. They are specialist experts - highly skilled at building relationships with women. They have a great passion for the work and a strong commitment to the women.
- Covid has exacerbated challenges and exponentially affected women in many ways. These challenges and related needs will likely increase in a post covid social recovery phase. All indicating the WMC continues to be needed.

### Summary findings related to WMC project outcomes:

**Outcome 1:** *People who have experienced hardship crisis are better able to improve their circumstances.*

Women accessing the project have been able to improve some of their circumstances relating to a number of areas (e.g. practical needs, finance/benefits, housing, poverty, well-being) with the support of WMC workers and partners, in particular CAB.

**Outcome 2:** *People who are at high risk of experiencing hardship crisis are better able to plan for the future.*

Many examples of progress related to **empowerment** in terms of women **developing their own solutions to difficulties** were found. Many women had started to reflect on their situation, develop insights into their mental health and started to build emotional resilience and self-care skills. There was evidence of improved 'emotional wellbeing' in terms of self-confidence and self-esteem. Progress in these areas can be seen as better enabling women to plan for the future.

**Outcome 3:** *Those experiencing, or who are at high risk of experiencing, hardship crisis, have a stronger, more collective, voice, to better shape a response to their issues.*

Some examples of co-production have emerged where workers identified opportunities for women to get involved in the project and to develop a more collective voice to influence their issues. Opportunities for co-production have been restricted by (a) women not being in a position to engage in this way (b) the limitations for face to face engagement created by covid. The online support groups that ran during lockdown were a real achievement, especially in connecting with women who face barriers to engaging online.

**Outcome 4:** *Organisations are better able to support people to effectively tackle hardship through sharing learning and evidence.*

The WMC project took a partnership approach and worked with wider system stakeholders in order to share good practice and learning around supporting women experiencing hardship crisis. While engagement with the partner agencies has not gone as originally planned, those partners who have been closely involved are broadly positive about the partnership and the work of the project. They reported increased knowledge and awareness of the issues women face and the role of WC, and an appreciation of each other's expertise and experience. Wider stakeholders value WMC as a standout, trusted, respected, flexible and responsive service which understands women's multiple and complex issues and has efficient and effective referral and communication mechanisms.

## Reflections and Considerations for WMC:

- 1) Secure **additional funding** to continue the work of the WMC project which is highly valued and needed.
- 2) Ensure any future **partnership agreement** is regularly (annually) reviewed and that the aims of the project and partner's roles are revisited.
- 3) Consider ways to further increase the **engagement of partner agencies** e.g. allocation of funding, engagement from start re: roles and responsibilities. Agree a process for efficient handover when staff move on to ensure consistency of connection with partner agencies.
- 4) Identify potential risks and mitigation related to partnership working.
- 5) Continue to identify more **opportunities for co-production** with the women to help enable them to develop a stronger, more collective, voice.
- 6) Continue to offer **free childcare** to women accessing WMC to enable their participation and engagement.
- 7) Consider **greater use of volunteers** to increase capacity and support the workload of workers e.g. volunteers to help run the groups.
- 8) Include costs of **clinical supervision** for project staff dealing with women with complex needs in any future funding bids. May improve staff retention.
- 9) **Promote the work of WMC** by drawing on this evaluation and the strong evidence for the approach. Identify and maximise opportunities to share the work via stakeholders, partners and local fora.

### 'Where will these women go?'

It is hard to overstate how much women, staff, and stakeholders value WMC. Throughout all the interviews conducted during this evaluation, the positivity WMC is viewed with, and the gratitude people feel is palpable. Everyone interviewed expressed their concerns about the WMC project no longer running, asking repeatedly, **where will these women go?** Stakeholders and WMC staff were clear there is nowhere else in Calderdale that is equipped to respond to these women's multiple needs. The concern is that women will inevitably 'go underground' or turn to other already hard-pressed agencies such as social care, housing, GP, or mental health services - adding extra pressure on limited resources.

This report was written by

Sarah Frost and Dr Sarah Lloyd of Sarah E. Frost Associates Ltd in July 2021.

A full version of this report can be found at [www.womencentre.org.uk/publications-2/](http://www.womencentre.org.uk/publications-2/)

For more information on Women Making Changes - please email:

[info@womencentre.org.uk](mailto:info@womencentre.org.uk) or phone: 01422 386500

<https://womencentre.org.uk/women-making-changes/>