advance

Lunch & Learn

The Power of Women's Centres

Advance is an innovative charity that supports women and girls to lead safe and equal lives for over 25 years.

We help women and girls who have experienced trauma through domestic abuse and the criminal justice system. We do this by providing practical and emotional support, wherever and whenever a woman or girl wants it. They are often facing multiple challenges at once, such as with their housing, mental health and personal safety.

We run services across London and the south of England in safe spaces like our Women's Centres. We also work collaboratively in key locations, such as police stations and hospitals, so that women and girls can get help at the earliest opportunity. We work closely with a variety of partners offering different kinds of specialist support, including for Black and minoritised women and those from LGBTQIA+ communities.

Advance Minerva Service

We provide dedicated support to women. We do this by working closely with the Probation Service, as well as other statutory services like housing and health to get women all the help they need in one place. This includes emotional well-being, housing, domestic abuse, education, training and employment.

Healing from abuse, trauma and time in prison can be a lonely and challenging experience. Our women's centres are designed to be a relaxed, welcoming place where women can be themselves, share their feelings, and meet others with similar experiences.

Minerva Thames Valley

Last year we supported over **130 women** with positive results:

87% felt confident in managing my own wellbeing

86% felt safer

90% felt more hopeful about the future

83% able to build trusting relationships with other organisations

Why Women's Centres?

Much of our support for women is delivered within our dedicated women's centres in Kent, Hampshire, Essex, Berkshire and Hertfordshire, and North, East and West London. These are safe, private spaces where women and girls can access emotional support and practical help, meet with their keyworker and take part in a variety of activities.

- Nearly 7 in 10 women in contact with the CJS supported by Advance report experiences of abuse or trauma. (1)
- Women in contact with the criminal justice system report multiple needs and trauma at a higher rate than men, and specifically:
  - 76% of women report mental health needs compared to 51% of men (2)
  - 46% report problematic substance misuse on entry to prison compared to 27% of men (3)
  - 28% report problematic alcohol use on entry to prison compared to 17% of men (4)
  - 53% women report experiences of childhood abuse compared to 27% of men (5)
  - about 70% of women who offend report experiencing abuse, although this figure is likely to be higher (6)
- A report by the Tavin Institute states women engaging with women's centres after prison release had a reoffending rate of less than 5%, compared to the national average of 26.5% (7)
- There is an enormous gap between the overall cost of current provisions, exceeding £1.7 billion, and the one-time investment in prevention and general diversionary services of £6.5 million over two years (or £3.25 million per year) (8)
- Included in a report by the Women's Budget Group 'The Case for Sustainable Funding for Women's Centres'(9), a cost-benefit analysis of the Women's Centre Model (10) shows one centre making a saving of £1.8 million over a 5-year period; the return on investment is calculated as 4.68, which means that £4.68 is saved for every £1 invested in the project.

Advance Women's Centres

The Advance Women's Centres act as a sanctuary for women that Advance support to be themselves, as well as being a place for nurturing personal development and social connections.

A woman supported by Advance could access the centre for many reasons, to access group work and activities at the centre, to meet keyworkers or other professionals for 1-1 appointments, to use the facilities such as kitchens, bathrooms and washing machines, and to access donations. There are also regular drop-ins, which may include legal clinics, financial sessions with an external professional or the centre co-ordinator, or sexual health clinics. Regular group sessions are put on for the women supported by Advance, these include coffee mornings, creative workshops, singing and poetry, hair and makeup masterclasses, pamper sessions and wellbeing workshops. The presence and ongoing activities of the women's centres see to a range of client support needs, including social inclusion, emotional wellbeing, lifestyle, dependency and recovery, and finance, benefits and debt.

1. Advance internal data (2024)
2. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales (2022), Annual Report 2021-22
3. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (2020) Annual Report 2019-20
4. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (2020) Annual Report 2019-20
5. Williams, K., Papadopoulou, V. & Booth, N. (2012) Prisoners' childhood and family backgrounds, London: MoJ
6. Ministry of Justice (2018) Female Offender Strategy
7. Tavin Institute. (2019). Why Women's Centres Work: Report. Retrieved from https://www.tavinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Women-and-Girls-Briefing-Report-Final-_web.pdf
8. Women's Budget Group. (2020). WBG 15 Women's Centres Report v4. Retrieved from https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/WBG-15-Womens-Centres-Report-v4.pdf
9. Women's Budget Group. (2020). WBG 15 Women's Centres Report v4. Retrieved from https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/WBG-15-Womens-Centres-Report-v4.pdf
10. Abbott, K. (2017). Women MATTA cost-benefit analysis. Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA)

Feedback forms from Minerva groups

The following feedback was retrieved over the same18 month period of Feb 2023 to July 2024. We have been able to gather feedback from 191 attendees over 20+ different groups.

85%	84%	98%	98%
Rated the session 5/5	Found the session useful	Likely to recommend	Likely to return

"This has been a brilliant thing to get me away from problems, to create. I carry the heart I made during the group in my bag"

"Fun time, positive, engaging. Helps me connect with other women in a safe place under no pressure"

Reported Barriers to Attendance:

- Distance and Travel Costs
- Mental and Physical Health
- Childcare

What can you do?

- **Champion the work of Women's Centres**

Use your position within your organisation or sector to advocate for the role of Women's Centres in providing trauma-informed, gender-responsive, and culturally competent support. Amplifying our work helps shift policy, funding, and practice in our favour and support us to access funding opportunities from local and national commissioners, as well as private funders.

- **Work collaboratively with us**

Whether you are from a statutory body, a third-sector organisation, or a funder, we ask you to explore ways of working together. This could include co-locating services within Women's Centres, providing support, improving referral pathways, sharing training opportunities, or jointly delivering sessions.

Recommendations

"I found the session extremely enjoyable and very relaxing to the point where I was able to disconnect from everything and appreciate being in the moment"

- Formally recognise women's centres as essential safe spaces providing long-term, holistic support to women nationwide.
- Ensure long-term, sustainable local and national funding for women's centres across the UK.
- Remove funding restrictions that limit women who can access these spaces.
- Increase flexible funding and establish a statutory basis for community-based specialist services for women.
- Additional funding for childcare professionals, as well as child-friendly activities within Women's Centres.
- Invest in comprehensive mental health support that addresses the specific needs of women, including those who have experienced domestic abuse.

Investing in this low-cost, high-impact support could reduce the demand on services such as A&E, housing crisis teams, social care, and the prison system.

"I really enjoyed being vulnerable and knowing I was safe and comforted"