



Providing support to girls and young women under the age of 25

Insights from experts on a gender-and-age response embedded within the Young Futures programme



This paper accompanies the framework and is informed by insights gathered during our roundtable discussions. It highlights key themes, barriers, and opportunities identified in those conversations, emphasizing the need for gender- and age-specific responses within the Young Futures programme. Our aim is for this supporting document to demonstrate why these considerations are essential and to provide a detailed rationale for their inclusion.

Barriers, opportunities and enablers to delivery of gender-specific support for girls and young women

In September 2025, Advance and London's VRU hosted an expert roundtable to discuss the key elements of service delivery for girls and young women at risk of violence, exploitation and criminalisation within the Government's Young Futures programme. Through this discussion, a range of issues were identified as barriers, opportunities and enablers of this work. This section explores some of the key themes and how the public and voluntary sector could come together to successfully implement more services for girls and young women. Key themes identified were:

Safe Spaces and Service Design

Barriers:

Roundtable participants made note that while beneficial, girls often lack access to safe, age-and-gender-specific spaces. Mixed-gender environments can be intimidating or unsafe due to relational dynamics, cultural sensitivities, or trauma histories.

Opportunities:

Creating dedicated spaces and times for girls within youth hubs, and other settings can foster trust and allow for disclosures. Gender- and trauma-informed training should be embedded within all hubs - whether dedicated spaces for girls or mixed cohorts - to ensure that staff engaging with young people are equipped to provide safe, welcoming environments, which avoid male dominance or de-prioritisation of girls' access. This should include wider VAWG training, enabling staff to identify and respond to the specific needs of girls and young women, alongside co-located services and floating outreach which can meet girls where they are and reduce access barriers.

Enablers:

Designing services with girls through co-production and increasing the number of female staff and trusted adults, alongside effective training for all professionals in contact with girls and young women.

Partnership working across sectors, including schools, criminal justice agencies, housing, health, and grassroots organisations can help embed wraparound support and increase visibility of services.



I'M JUST SAYING THAT WITH THE POINT OF HIGHLIGHTING FEMALE NEEDS, THEY COME TO THE FOREFRONT WHEN THEY ARE IN THAT SAFE, SECLUDED SPACE AS OPPOSED TO BEING AROUND BOYS SOMETIMES.



Training and professional confidence

Barriers:

Roundtable participants reported a lack of confidence from professionals, including youth workers, social workers, police, and other statutory professionals in supporting the specific needs of girls and young women. This was particularly true when discussing issues relating to VAWG, exploitation, and the links to criminalisation. This knowledge is foundational to broaching the range of other challenges and opportunities that were discussed.

Opportunities:

There is a clear need to develop a specialist workforce that understands the gendered and trauma-informed needs of girls and young women – and this approach should start for girls as young as primary school age, embedding child specific provision rooted in early intervention. This includes increasing the number of female youth workers and embedding standardised, evidence-based training across sectors.

Training should cover relational dynamics, intersectionality, digital and online influences, contextual safeguarding, and the impact of gendered trauma. Guidance and best practice frameworks should be co-produced with young women and girls to ensure relevance and authenticity.

Enablers:

Co-production with girls and young women is essential to shaping how services are designed and delivered, ensuring they reflect lived experience and build trust.

Multi-agency working and partnership delivery, supported by cross-government commitments can embed consistent, trauma-informed practice across all levels of service provision and policy implementation.



AND IT JUST SHOWS HOW NAIVE I WAS IN TERMS OF UNDERSTANDING THE ISSUES THAT WOMEN AND GIRLS FACE IN RELATION TO VIOLENCE AND PATRIARCHY AND EVERYTHING THAT'S IN AND AROUND MISOGYNY AS WELL. BUT IT'S BEEN A CHALLENGE FOR ME TO UNDERSTAND THAT FROM MY PERSPECTIVE, FROM MY LIMITED VIEW.



Place-based provision and infrastructure

Barriers:

Roundtable participants noted that girls and young women face additional barriers in accessing local provision, which is accessible to them. This might be that they cannot afford to travel, or they feel unsafe to travel. There is a significant lack of dedicated infrastructure and safe spaces for young women and girls to access, alongside limited existing services with which to partner.

Opportunities:

Utilise existing community assets such as women's centres, youth clubs, and community centres by introducing dedicated timetabling for girls-only sessions. Wider community engagement offers a chance to co-create inclusive environments that reflect the lived experiences of young women and girls. Venues should be fully accessible, avoid unsafe or poorly lit routes, and take into account anxiety and safety concerns in service planning.

Enablers:

Developing clear and transparent listings of what is available locally, ensuring young women and girls know where and how to access support. This includes strategic mapping of existing infrastructure with girl and young women co-production from the beginning, to ensure the spaces reflect them and their needs.

Meaningful, relevant opportunities and activities

Barriers:

Roundtable participants reported a lack of current opportunities or activities specifically aimed at girls and young women, particularly within mainstream services. Existing provision often fails to reflect their lived experiences, interests, or the relational and cultural dynamics that shape their engagement.

Also noted by roundtable participants is low self-esteem and poor body image which develops early, and is increasingly common amongst young people, but manifests differently amongst girls and boys. A report by GirlGuiding notes that 6 in 10 girls and young women aged 11-21 are consumed by their own negative thoughts about how they look. [1] It is important to have meaningful interventions, which understand this difference and engage positively with them.

Another barrier identified is digital inequality. In an increasingly digital world, access to technology is essential—but for many girls, this access is limited due to socio-economic, social, or cultural factors that restrict their use of digital tools at home. According to a report by Deloitte, women in the UK are 14–22% more likely to experience digital poverty.

[1] GirlGuiding. girls-attitudes-survey-2024

For children, digital exclusion can have serious consequences. It is linked to school exclusion, poverty, and increased contact with the criminal justice system.

Opportunities:

Co-production with girls and young women offers a powerful route to designing and delivering services that are relevant, engaging, and reflective of their lived experiences. By involving them directly in shaping programmes, activities can become more inclusive, empowering, and effective in building trust and participation - with long-term impact.

Enablers:

Embedding co-production as a core principle ensures that services are not only designed for girls and young women, but also by them. This could include creating spaces where they can access resources they might otherwise be denied, such as peer group sessions, outdoor activities centred around their interests, or access to digital tools for homework and recreational use.

Multi-agency collaboration and cross-government commitments are essential to developing inclusive, gender-responsive programmes that are sustainable and embedded across youth, education, and community sectors.



SO A LOT OF THE WORKSHOPS THAT WE RAN WERE BASED ON WHAT THEY WANTED TO DO. YOU KNOW, SOME WANTED TO GO OUT FOR A MEAL AND GET DRESSED UP AND GO FOR A MEAL BECAUSE THEY HADN'T BEEN TAKEN TO A RESTAURANT BEFORE. SOME WANTED TO DO BEAUTY, AND WE DID WELLNESS SESSIONS BECAUSE THAT'S WHAT THEY CHOSE TO DO, AND THEY HAD SOMEBODY COME INTO ONE OF OUR CENTRES WHERE THEY FEEL SAFE.



THE GIRLS ARE SAYING, 'WE DON'T NEED TO LOOK IN THE MIRROR AND WORRY ABOUT WHAT WE LOOK LIKE WHEN WE COME TO A YOUTH SETTING. WHEREAS IF THERE ARE BOYS THERE, WE REALLY WORRY ABOUT OUR APPEARANCE. WHEREAS HERE WE CAN COME WITH NO MAKEUP, WHATEVER CLOTHES WE WANT TO WEAR. THERE'S NO PRESSURE THAT WE HAVE TO LOOK A CERTAIN WAY, AND THEY CAN COME.' AND I THINK THE WORD THAT THEY USED IS 'BE THEMSELVES.'



Invisibility of Girls and Young Women and Gender-Based Harm

Barriers:

Participants shared that the harms faced by girls and young women remain invisible. Their experiences of trauma and violence are often normalised and not consistently recognised as adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), despite their long-term impact. This invisibility is compounded by adultification, internalised bias, and a lack of gendered understanding in services. Girls are often overlooked in data, excluded from mainstream narratives, and misunderstood in terms of their behavioural responses to trauma.

Despite the recognition of children as victims in their own right under the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, effective interventions to support them remain lacking. It is widely acknowledged that living in a household affected by domestic abuse can have profound and varied impacts on children. Moreover, due to differing societal expectations and cultural contexts, girls and boys experience and interpret domestic abuse in distinct ways, and the long-term effects can also greatly differ.

Another emerging concern raised by participants is the intersection between online and offline harm. Young women and girls are increasingly active online, which places them at heightened risk of violence - whether that violence remains digital or manifests in the physical world. At Advance, we have seen a significant number of referrals to our Young Londoners Victim Service involving girls and young women who have experienced gender-based crimes initiated online.

Opportunities:

There is scope to redefine what constitutes ACEs in a way that reflects the lived experiences of girls and young women. This redefinition can support improved data collection methods that capture hidden harms, including relational violence, peer-based abuse, online harms, which can be diminished even when directly related to wider offline harms, and caring responsibilities. It also opens the door to more inclusive service design and policy advocacy, including the use of peer mentors and role models.

It is vital that professionals working with young people are equipped to identify signs of domestic abuse, engage meaningfully with children, and respond effectively. This includes understanding the intersecting factors such as gender, cultural context, and the evolving nature of harm in both online and offline spaces.

Enablers:

Embedding gendered and trauma-informed frameworks into youth services and justice responses is essential to making girls' experiences visible. Building community partnership models that meet girls where they are, whether that is in schools, youth clubs, or informal settings can support disclosure and engagement. Improved data sharing and intelligence tools, such as Merlin reports, can help identify at-risk girls earlier and inform more targeted interventions.



I WAS SORT OF LEFT FEELING LIKE, WELL, ACTUALLY THE DAY-TO-DAY EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG WOMEN AND GIRLS—WHETHER IT'S BEING LEERED AT, WHETHER IT'S BEING GROPED ON BUSES—YOU KNOW, IT'S TRAUMA AND IT'S ADVERSE EXPERIENCE, BUT IT WOULDN'T MEET A THRESHOLD. SO IT'S ALMOST LIKE JUST THE NORMALISATION OF THAT DAY-TO-DAY MEANS IT'S NOT QUITE CAPTURED IN THE SEVERITY OR CATEGORISATION THAT WE MIGHT USE THAT SORT OF SAYS, "OH, WELL, THAT'S DEFINITELY AN ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCE." IT JUST PERMEATES EVERYTHING. AND SO IT BECOMES QUITE INVISIBLE AND INTANGIBLE WHEN IT THEN COMES TO THINKING ABOUT THRESHOLDS AND DEVELOPING SERVICES.



Data, evidence and information sharing

Barrier:

A consistent theme from roundtable participants was the lack of robust young women and girls data. Their experiences are often hidden or underrepresented in datasets, making it difficult to understand the true scale of harm or need. Without gender-disaggregated data and trauma-informed metrics, services struggle to advocate for change or design effective interventions.

Opportunity:

Innovative ways of gathering data are needed to get a better picture of the experiences and needs of young women and girls. This can be supported by multi-agency working and partnership delivery, including through Prevention Partnerships, strengthening varied data collection and information sharing. Embedding gendered metrics across youth services can help surface-hidden patterns of risk and need.

Enablers:

Cross-sector collaboration is needed to agree on measurable outcomes and data standards. These should be embedded within a national framework that informs local commissioning and supports consistent, gender-responsive service delivery. Using more qualitative data alongside, quantitative data, publishing anonymised case studies and thematic analysis can also support policy influence and funding decisions.



HAVING ACCESS TO IMPROVED DATA JUST TO ALLOW US TO HAVE A GREATER UNDERSTANDING AROUND RISK AND NEED AND BE ABLE TO THEN OBVIOUSLY DESIGN THE LIVE SERVICES TO MEET THAT DEMAND.



Intersectionality and Individual Needs

Barriers:

Roundtable participants shared that often girls and young women whose experiences are shaped by intersecting identities including neurodivergence, caring responsibilities, school exclusion, race, ethnicity, and cultural background often face additional challenges to accessing support. Girls and young women are not a homogenous group. Commissioning often fails to account for this complexity, leading to one-size-fits-all approaches that miss the root causes of behaviour and disengagement.

Intersecting and complex needs have a wider impact on girls and young women which can include poor physical and mental health and earlier puberty starts, which can have long-term effects on girls.

Another emerging concern involves young women and girls, including some below the legal age, who have accounts on platforms such as OnlyFans. A significant issue with this and similar online platforms is that they offer financial incentives to girls and young women, many of whom come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds or feel empowered by the sense of independence these platforms provide. However, the long-term impacts on their well-being are often not fully understood or recognised by those engaging with them.

Opportunities:

Tailored mentoring and support can address individual needs through specialist “by and for” organisations. Understanding the root causes of behaviour, such as trauma, exclusion, or unmet neurodivergent needs, rather than responding only to crisis, can lead to more effective and compassionate interventions.

Enablers:

Specialist training for practitioners and flexible service models are essential to allow for individualised support. This must be supported by funded, intersectional, culturally-aware, and inclusive services that are embedded in local communities. Service providers must develop a deeper understanding of how platforms like OnlyFans and so-called “Sugar Daddy” sites affect the lives of young women and girls, and explore effective ways to engage and support them. Co-production with girls and the women who work with them can ensure services reflect lived experience and build trust.



BUT USUALLY WHEN YOU'RE SPEAKING TO PROVIDERS OR EVEN FAMILIES, THEY OVERLOOK OR NEGLECT THE EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN AND GIRLS. AND IT'S REALLY SORT OF SAD THAT THEY'RE EXPECTED TO RUN HOUSEHOLDS, PARTICULARLY IF THEY COME FROM MINORITY ETHNIC BACKGROUNDS. YOU KNOW, SOME TRADITIONS EXPECT GIRLS TO BE JUST MUCH MORE WITH IT, MULTITASKING, IN FACT TAKING ON A MOTHERLY ROLE, PARTICULARLY IF THEY HAVE SIBLINGS THAT ARE YOUNGER THAN THEM. IN SHORT, ALL OF THIS ADDS UP TO HISTORICALLY BEING OVERLOOKED AND HOW WE CHANGE THAT NARRATIVE.



Criminalisation and Justice Response

Barrier:

Roundtable participants also noted that girls are increasingly criminalised, often for trauma-related behaviours such as assaulting officers. These behaviours are frequently misunderstood and punished rather than supported. There is a lack of understanding of gendered harm, the dynamics of power and control in abusive relationships, and how these intersect with youth work and justice systems.

Child exploitation, gangs, and county lines. Early prevention, spotting the signs for criminal grooming. Child links to gangs and where to refer for support. Diversionary routes which are child friendly.

Opportunity:

Child-first policing and trauma-informed justice responses can reduce criminalisation, provided they take a gendered approach. Specialist services that understand the dynamics of gendered abuse and relational trauma are essential to supporting girls in contact with the justice system.

Enablers:

Training for police and justice professionals on gender and trauma is critical. Improved referral pathways, co-commissioned services, and embedded trauma-informed practice can ensure girls receive appropriate support rather than punitive responses. Partnership with women's justice coalitions and youth organisations can support shared practice and influence policy.



IF GIRLS HAVE EXPERIENCED A LOT OF TRAUMA AND VARIOUS DIFFERENT FORMS OF VIOLENCE, INCLUDING SEXUAL VIOLENCE, LIKE HAVING A BIG BURLY POLICE OFFICER WITH HANDCUFFS GETTING YOU INTO A CORNER WHERE YOU'RE NOT ABLE TO EXERCISE YOUR FLIGHT RESPONSE IS QUITE LIKELY TO END UP IN A REALLY CONTENTIOUS SITUATION.



Partnership Working

Barrier:

Roundtable participants told us that fragmented services and inconsistent collaboration between statutory and non-statutory organisations limit the effectiveness of support. Prevention partnerships often rely on consent, which many young people do not give, reducing engagement and access to services. This leads to duplication, missed opportunities, and girls falling through the gaps.

Opportunity:

Building stronger partnerships with schools, youth clubs, health services, housing, and social care can create a more coordinated response to harm reduction. Co-commissioning and shared practice models can improve service delivery, reduce duplication, and ensure girls receive holistic support.

Enablers:

Embedding a Coordinated Community Response (CCR) model and upskilling practitioners across sectors will strengthen collaboration. Building partnership models that include youth and gender specialists, “by and for” organisations, specialist mental health services, and education/training/employment (ETE) support will ensure wraparound care and continuity.



SO I THINK IT'S ABOUT HOW WE ENABLE AND UTILISE SOME OF THE PARTNERSHIPS AND SPACES WHERE YOUNG GIRLS ACTUALLY ARE AND DO THAT IN A WAY THAT ISN'T THROUGH A JUSTICE-OFFENDING LENS, BUT ACTUALLY HOW DO WE UPSKILL PRACTITIONERS ON THE GROUND AND SUPPORT THEM TO HAVE THOSE CONVERSATIONS AND ALIGN WITH WHAT MAYBE THE LOCAL AUTHORITIES ARE DOING TO COORDINATE THAT SUPPORT.



Commissioning and Funding

Barrier:

Another consistent point made by roundtable participants is the effect of short commissioning cycles, and the barrier they create in measuring long-term impact, especially in prevention work. Funding is inconsistent and often not aligned with the specific needs of girls and young women, leading to gaps in provision and instability in services. Outcomes are often narrowly defined, failing to capture relational or emotional progress.

Moreover, this is compounded by insecure contracts and unstable funding, which leave services vulnerable to sudden changes. These disruptions can significantly affect staffing and client safety, and in some cases, result in charities having to absorb the financial burden.

Opportunity:

Longer-term commissioning and clearer funding strategies can support sustainable, gender-specific services. Commissioners can embed gendered principles from the outset to ensure services are inclusive, trauma-informed, and responsive to the lived experiences of girls and young women.

Enablers:

National frameworks and strategic alignment across departments, such as DCMS and the Women's Justice Board, can support consistent funding and commissioning. Embedding gender-specific principles into commissioning guidance and outcome frameworks will help ensure services are designed with longevity, impact, and equity in mind.



IN SOME OTHER SERVICES, BECAUSE GIRLS ARE IN SUCH A MINORITY WITHIN THOSE YOUTH JUSTICE SERVICES, IT'S OFTEN DOWN TO INDIVIDUALS—PRACTITIONERS TAKING A REAL INTEREST IN OR BEING A REAL ADVOCATE FOR GENDER-SPECIFIC, GENDER-INFORMED WORK WITH GIRLS. AND FOR THOSE THAT DON'T NECESSARILY HAVE THE GUIDANCE OR THE KNOWLEDGE OR THE EXPERTISE AROUND HOW TO DO THAT, EVEN IF THERE'S A REAL WILLINGNESS TO DO THE WORK AND TO DO IT IN THE RIGHT WAY, THERE'S ACTUALLY VERY LITTLE IN TERMS OF NATIONAL GUIDANCE OR SUPPORT AROUND HOW PRACTITIONERS SHOULD ACTUALLY BE DOING THAT.

