

**VRU**

MAYOR OF LONDON  
VIOLENCE REDUCTION UNIT

advance



# Supporting Girls and Young Women

*Essential principles for delivery in the  
Young Futures programme*



This document sets out a working foundational framework for delivering specialist support to girls and young women under the Government's Young Futures programme, particularly those at risk of experiencing violence, exploitation, and criminalisation.

Developed in partnership by Advance and London's Violence Reduction Unit (VRU), the framework has been built from insights from expert stakeholders and service users, including those supported through the Advance X VRU's dedicated girls and young women mentoring programme, The Maia and Lift Programme. We believe that this framework works to compliment the governments wider work, including their recently published National Youth and VAWG strategies.

The Young Futures programme's stated priorities include reducing knife crime, tackling youth unemployment, and improving mental health. However, we must recognise the unique challenges faced by girls and young women, and Advance and London's VRU see the Young Futures programme as an opportunity to transform the response to violence affecting women and girls through access to positive opportunities and co-ordinated prevention and early intervention through partnership working.

This paper sets out:

- Recommendations for embedding gender-responsive practice in the Young Futures Programme
- Core principles for delivering services that meet the needs of girls and young women

With thanks to:

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Your contributions were truly invaluable in bringing together this framework. We hope this work will help inform how the government rolls out its Young Futures projects, ensuring they are gender-, age-, and trauma-responsive.

We would particularly like to thank colleagues from the following organisations for their support, collaboration and expertise which formulated this framework:

Abianda, Active Communities, Agenda Alliance, Barking and Dagenham Council, Centre for Justice Innovation, Centre for Young Lives, Daddyless Daughters, Enfield Council, Fight 4 Change, Greater London Authority, Greenwich Council, Home Office, IPPR, Jewish Women's Aid, LBHF, Mentivity, Millwall Community Foundation, National Children's Bureau, National Youth Agency, Step Up Hub, Women's Resource Centre, and Youth Endowment Fund.

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## *Summary of recommendations for the Government's Young Futures Programme*

### **The Government's Young Futures Programme has two key delivery arms:**

- **Young Futures Panels (led by the Home Office)** - multi-agency panels convened by Local Authorities within Violence Reduction Unit areas, designed to identify and build action plans for young people at risk of violence, criminalisation, or other forms of harm. Panels will proactively identify and refer young people to a range of different support services and interventions much earlier, including Young Futures Hubs.
- **Young Futures Hubs (led by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport)** – will also have a multi-agency focus, bringing together services in physical, community spaces where young people can connect with youth workers and get the support they need.

### **The Role of Government at All Levels**

- **National Government:** Sets policy direction, provides funding, and ensures strategic alignment with national priorities (VAWG Strategy and Youth Strategy).
- **Regional Bodies:** such as London's VRU: Act as convenors and system leaders, embedding a public health approach, coordinating multi-agency partnerships, sharing data and best practice, and aligning Young Futures with regional violence reduction strategies. VRUs can leverage existing networks with police, health, education, and voluntary sectors to strengthen delivery and accountability.
- **Local Authorities:** Lead operational delivery of Panels and Hubs, commission services, and embed gender-specific frameworks tailored to local needs.

## **Gender-Specific Understanding and Training**

Professionals within Young Futures Hubs and Panels will play a critical role in shaping interventions for girls and young women at risk of violence, exploitation, and criminalisation. To do this effectively, they must understand the unique challenges these young women face and adopt approaches that are both gender- and trauma-informed.

- Ensure all professionals delivering services within Young Futures Hubs and supporting decision-making of Young Futures Panels understand the gender-specific needs of girls and young women.
- Invest in training delivered by specialist women's services and young women with lived experience. Training should cover gendered-trauma, intersectionality, relational practice, contextual safeguarding, including the impact of self-identity and esteem, as well as online violence and misogyny, power imbalances, and trust-building.
- Promote child-first engagement in policing and statutory settings that is gender- and trauma-informed. Police officers should be trained to understand trauma responses and avoid criminalising survival behaviours.
- VRUs to spotlight and share best practice.

## **Funding for Women's Specialist Services**

Training alone is insufficient without a strong specialist sector to provide tailored support. Sustainable funding must underpin this work to ensure girls and young women can access services that meet their needs.

- Provide funding to both age-and-gender specialist services with expertise in the VAWG, exploitation, and criminalisation that are able to build trusted relationships with girls and young women.
- Enable mainstream providers to partner with specialist services, offering meaningful and relevant opportunities to girls and young women.
- Maximise use of existing infrastructure, including women's centres and outreach services.
- Grow the specialist sector to reduce postcode lottery in support access.
- Ensure all services recognise and respond to gendered harm, including caring responsibilities, domestic abuse, sexual violence, and peer-based intimate partner violence.

## **Monitoring and Evaluation**

To ensure accountability and continuous improvement, monitoring and evaluation must reflect the complexity of young women's experiences.

- Set reasonable monitoring and evaluation parameters based on evidence-based best practices for reducing harm.
- Develop measurable outcomes that reflect the complexity of young women's experiences, including relational, emotional, and safety-based outcomes

- Create feedback loops between frontline services, strategic leads, and policymakers to inform service design and advocacy.
- National government should strengthen data-sharing, establish national frameworks that establish consistent and clear rules for data-sharing across partners, which are co-designed and implemented to ensure usability.
- Regional bodies, such as the VRU, can support local data capacity and dissemination of learning to ensure prevention partnership are evidence driven.

## **Commissioning and Service Security**

Commissioning must support stability and long-term impact.

- Build longer commissioning cycles to allow for meaningful engagement, relationship-building, and impact measurement.
- Support capacity-building for non-statutory organisations, especially those led by and for women and girls, and Black, migrant, and minoritised women.

## **Co-Production and Safe Spaces**

Girls and young women must be active partners in shaping services, ensuring that the voices and experiences of young women and girls are truly embedded into service provision.

- Embed co-production with young women and girls at every stage of service design, delivery, and evaluation. Include paid consultation, youth advisory panels, and lived experience leadership roles.
- Design gender-specific safe spaces that are culturally sensitive, trauma-informed, and co-created with young women. These spaces should foster confidence and allow for safe disclosure.

## **Strengthening Partnerships**

Multi-agency collaboration is essential for effective and holistic pathways and support. From a London-wide perspective, the VRU ensures broad, inclusive partnership and effective challenge around prevention and early risk identification. The VRU has developed and maintained strong working relationships with strategic partners such as the MPS and NHS/Integrated Care Boards, Local Authorities and the Voluntary Community Sector.



- Strengthen multi-agency partnerships across schools, social services, housing, health, and youth justice through shared protocols and joint training.
- Embed a Coordinated Community Response (CCR) model across operational, policy, and strategic levels.
- Promote co-commissioning across strategic and local authorities to ensure holistic, sustainable, and locally responsive services.

## Strategic Alignment

The Young Futures project must align with existing national and local strategies.

- Align Young Futures with existing strategies such as the VAWG strategy, National Youth Strategy (DCMS), and Women's Justice Board strategy.
- In large regional areas, such as London, regional bodies such as the VRU are best placed to hold oversight of Young Future, aligning regional violence reduction strategies and funding to enhance partnerships and existing efforts.
- Ensure commissioning departments embed gender-specific principles from the outset, including trauma-informed practice and lived experience involvement.
- Explore opportunities through devolution to embed partnership and CCR models early in programme design. Support local authorities in developing gender-specific frameworks.
- An explicit connection to be held by local authorities between Young Futures & recently funded Family Hubs, DCMS youth strategy and Youth Hubs, including new Youth Trailblazers scheme. This alignment will create clear pathways between Young Futures Hubs, London-wide programmes, and local secondary and tertiary provision

## Awareness and Accessibility

Girls and young women need clear, visible pathways to support.

- Increase awareness of available services through youth-friendly communications, outreach campaigns, and digital platforms.
- Create a network of safe, visible community spaces tailored to young women and girls with full accessibility and travel support.
- Promote youth spaces with co-located services and female staff to foster trust and accessibility, including drop-in support, peer mentoring, neurodiverse-aware and culturally competent services.



“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.”



# Core principles for delivering services that meet the needs of girls and young women

## Core Principles

*These are the foundational values to deliver effective, gender-specific services for girls and young women. Whilst each principle is distinct, there will always be some overlap in intention and definition.*

### **Gender- & trauma-informed: impact of misogyny, violence and abuse**

Services must recognise the unique experiences of girls and young women, including the impact of structural misogyny and gender-based violence. It should understand the impact of both online and offline harm, and how they interconnect with one another, as well as the specific impact of online harms on their self-esteem and wellbeing. Girls and young women who are exposed to violence, trauma, and/or Adverse Childhood Experiences, as well as issues such as school exclusion and criminal justice contact, experience these in different ways to boys and young men.

### **Intersectional, culturally-aware, localised and inclusive**

Being intersectional in our approach means recognising that everyone has intersecting identities, which shape their experiences of violence and access to services. These identities include ethnicity, race, religion, and culture, as well as sexuality, gender, and age. We must also consider how neurodiversity, physical ability, and mental health intersect with how girls and young women experience support. Services should be tailored to the local context and demographics. Community outreach strengthens delivery by engaging directly with local communities, ensuring that support is accessible, trusted, and responsive to local needs.

### **Long-term, holistic support for empowerment & independence**

Girls and young women often require support which is long-term in nature, flexible, and appropriate for their needs. Whilst long-term, this support must build resilience, self-confidence and independence; it must enable them to care for themselves in the future through dedicated work focused on recognising what triggers them, positive decision-making, healthy choices and building positive in-person relationships.

### **Unconditional, positive regard to build self-esteem & self-identity**

Girls and young women deserve unconditional, positive regard from those around them. Embedding this into service delivery enables mutual respect and the development of a trusted relationship and focuses on strengths and achievements, aiming to build self-esteem and positive self-identity.

### **Co-designed with girls and young women**

The views and voices of young women and girls must be present throughout every aspect of service design and delivery. This includes centring what girls and young women want from the service, particularly in the “why”, the “where”, the “who” and the “what” (for more, see Co-designing Young Futures Hubs in local areas, L. Billingham and H. Jones, the OU and McPin Foundation) or see the creation of [Advance Bloom Hub](#).

### **Child- and young person-centred, age-appropriate**

It is essential that services are child-and young person-centred, prioritising their best interests, keeping them at the centre of decision-making. This must include listening to what they say, taking their views seriously, and working with them and their families collaboratively when deciding how to support their needs (for more, see [Working Together to Safeguard Children, Department for Education](#))

Support must be person-centred, recognising each individual’s rights and choices, whilst providing holistic support to meet their needs. These services must recognise that young women aged 18-25 have distinct needs relating to their age and gender, compared to older women or men, including structural misogyny or violence. It is also important to note that for many in this cohort, they are at a transitional life period and may be facing support cliff-edges from statutory services.

### **Contextual safeguarding and whole family approach**

Contextual safeguarding recognises that children and young people are influenced by different contexts and environments, both within and outside of the family setting. These are inter-related and can lead to multiple risks which require specific and targeted approaches. (for more, see the work of Dr. Carlene Firmin at the University of Bedfordshire's [Contextual Safeguarding Network](#)).



“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.”



## *Mechanisms for delivery*

*These points summarise how support should be delivered – that is, the approach that needs to be taken in order to provide best practice support and activities for girls and young women.*

### **Separate, safe community spaces for young women and girls**

Women and girls value being listened to and supported without judgement; they value somewhere they can open up and be themselves, without expectation or pressure to look a certain way. Dedicated hubs should offer this space, where young women and girls can receive practical and emotional help from support workers, and opportunities to connect with peers.

These spaces should be inclusive, and accessible responding to the existing barriers young women and girls face when accessing community spaces.

### **Trusted relationships by-and-for women and girls**

Positive relationships with specialist support workers and trusted adults are fundamental to the delivery of specialist services for young women and girls.

These relationships build trust, self-identity, and confidence, as well as the skills and ability to recognise when and where to go for support.

### **Practical help tailored to individual goals & aspirations**

Proactive, practical and age-appropriate help tailored towards an individual girl or young women's personal aspirations helps build on their strengths and envision a positive future that they can step towards. This could include arranging appointments with professionals, applications for housing or benefits, or providing food bank vouchers and donated items, as well as access to workshops and training.

### **Consistent communication & emotional support**

Equally, maintaining consistent, positive communication with young women and girls, in a way that is best for them, is essential to building their self-esteem, self-confidence and self-identity; it demonstrates to the young women that they are valued, and they have not been given up on. This must come hand-in-hand with emotional support from staff and peers, particularly where young women and girls have experienced trauma.

### **Peer support**

Embedding peer support and/or role models means that girls and young women can speak to someone who has been through something similar, helping them realise that they are not alone. They can provide emotional and practical support through caring, listening and encouraging mentees with small steps, as well as offering them someone to look up to.

## Advocacy and multi-agency partnership working

A major part of delivery of a dedicated service for young women and girls is to facilitate communication between agencies including schools and youth settings, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, social care, and housing, and to advocate for the needs of the individual and improve understanding of her circumstance to produce better and more appropriate outcomes for her. Having someone in the young women's corner can help her feel less alone and support the coordination of sometimes multiple agency involvement, which can feel overwhelming, confusing and vary as the young woman ages out of systems.

## Insights, evaluation and learning

A culture of constant learning is also essential. The issues and social trends that can affect girls and young people evolve rapidly, meaning practice must continuously iterate to best meet the needs of service users. This is applicable both to the ways in which services support young women and girls and the type of content they might discuss.



“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.”



“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.”



## *Services and activities*

*Providing “something to do” is a fundamental part of effective youth work. The services and activities that are delivered within gender-specific provision for girls and young women must be underpinned by the core principles and mechanisms for delivery listed above.*

### **One-to-one mentoring**

One-to-one mentoring from expert women professionals and dedicated Peer Mentors provide the practical help and emotional support to young women and girls. This mentoring helps to build individual's self-identity and self-esteem through targeted and supported action plans, tailored to specific needs, goals, and aspirations. This ultimately helps to create a safe space for YWG to share feelings and experiences. The role can support with positive behaviour, attitudes, and choices as well as positive mental health and emotional well-being.

### **Group work, including targeted groups**

Similarly, group sessions with peers, particularly those with similar lived experience, can make girls and young women build their confidence, as well as practical skills. It can also support in the building of positive in-person relationships, and social skills as -well as build spaces which are fun. Targeted support should include girls and young women at risk of exploitation, as well as broader themes including online harms. These groups should embed a co-creation approach, working with girls and young women to design the timetable and bring in external expertise where appropriate.

### **Healthy relationships education**

It is essential that all children and young people receive comprehensive education on and modelling of healthy, interpersonal relationships. Whilst the onus for tackling VAWG cannot be on any one gender or sex alone, this should include intimate relationships as well as familial, peer, and other types of relationships. This can be delivered formally through group sessions or informally through one-to-one mentoring. Girls and young women who have been through experiences of abuse, may benefit from specialist programmes, which help them understand the dynamics of abuse and develop skills for healthier relationships. These workshops should be evidence-based, gender-and-age appropriate, neutral, trauma-informed and delivered in safe-spaces.

## Meaningful, positive opportunities

Positive, meaningful opportunities are effective, particularly for those who are from lower-economic backgrounds, and particularly where engagement is flexible and choice-led. This should include creative opportunities and skills development. These activities can enable girls and young women to engage with sensitive topics, such as experiences of misogyny and abuse, especially where these topics are combined with fun and strengths-based activities.

### Education, employment and training support

Some girls and young women may need support with education, employment or training. This support must be age-appropriate – for those still at school, maintaining positive attendance could be a primary focus, whereas for young adults, accessing training or employment opportunities is likely to be most appropriate.

### Counselling & mental health support

For some, specialist counselling and mental health support may be necessary. Mental ill-health is one of the key concerns for girls under the age of 18, with nearly twice as many reporting common mental health challenges compared to boys. Specialist therapeutic support, delivered by professionals with a deep understanding of gendered experiences, should be a key activity for specialist services for girls and young women.

### Referrals to statutory services

Specialist service providers should facilitate onward referrals to appropriate statutory agencies. Acting on the needs identified in young women and girls' personal action plans, practitioners should "join the dots" with key agencies, including housing and health.



"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."



## CORE PRINCIPLES

<b>GENDER- &amp; TRAUMA-INFORMED: IMPACT OF MISOGYNY, VIOLENCE AND ABUSE</b>	Long-term, holistic support for empowerment & independence	Unconditional, positive regard to build self-esteem & self-identity	Co-designed with girls and young women	Child- and young person-centred, age-appropriate	Contextual safeguarding and whole family approach	Intersectional, culturally-aware, localised and inclusive
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## MECHANISMS FOR DELIVERY

<b>SEPARATE, SAFE SPACES FOR GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN</b>	Trusted relationships by-and-for women and girls	Practical help tailored to individual goals & aspirations	Consistent communication & emotional support	Peer support	Advocacy and multi-agency partnership working	Insights, evaluation and learning
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## SERVICES AND ACTIVITIES

<b>ONE-TO-ONE MENTORING</b>	Group work, including targeted groups	Healthy relationships education	Meaningful, positive opportunities	Education, employment and training support	Counselling & mental health support	Referrals to statutory services
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