

# Building collaborative, women-led systems

How to drive place-based systems change  
in the Women's Sector: 2022-2023  
Learning Report

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Enabling women to be financially resilient



## Executive Summary

This report summarises the progress of the three place-based networks that Smallwood Trust is funding to collaboratively tackle the root causes of gendered poverty, from September 2022 to December 2023. The insights in the report have been collated drawing on Renaisi's interactions with the networks as a learning partner, including attendance at the networks' regular meetings, 1-1 learning discussions with network members, the networks' own reporting to Smallwood Trust and facilitated "Learning Network" sessions that have brought together the three funded networks to share learning from their work.

At the beginning of this programme, Renaisi facilitated a workshop that brought the networks identified five key elements of a place-based systems change approach to gendered poverty. They defined a place-based systems change approach as including:

The report summarises the networks' approaches and their learning about five key elements of a place-based systems change approach to gendered poverty that they identified at the beginning of this programme:

1. Improving the services and support available for women
2. Developing collaborative relationships and processes
3. Centring the lived experience of women
4. Influencing beyond the networks
5. Ongoing learning and adaptation

The report begins by summarising how each network has developed, before moving into summarising the network's progress and learning around elements, then outlining the network's ambitions for the upcoming two years of funding. Throughout the report key learning around how to take a place-based systems change to gendered poverty is highlighted in light blue boxes, and these insights are compiled in a [summary of learning that concludes the report](#).

# Table of Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Introduction .....   | 1  |
| Who are the women’s networks? .....                                  | 2  |
| Coventry Women’s Partnership .....                                   | 2  |
| Birmingham No Recourse to Public Funds Women’s Support Network ..... | 3  |
| Women of Wythenshawe.....  | 3  |
| Approach 1: Changing services and support.....                       | 6  |
| Joining up referral systems.....                                     | 6  |
| Building the capacity of women in their place .....                  | 7  |
| Sharing skills, knowledge and expertise .....                        | 8  |
| Approach 2: Collaborative relationships and processes .....          | 10 |
| Investing in relationship development.....                           | 10 |
| Clear coordination and structure.....                                | 11 |
| Approach 3: Centring lived experience.....                           | 13 |
| Creating spaces for storytelling and solidarity.....                 | 13 |
| Listening with openness to change.....                               | 13 |
| Approach 4: Influencing beyond the networks.....                     | 15 |
| Building relationships with power holders .....                      | 15 |
| Improving sector practice.....                                       | 16 |
| Advocating for policy change.....                                    | 16 |
| Supporting women’s voice.....  | 17 |
| Approach 5: Collective learning and adaptation .....                 | 18 |
| Monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) processes .....            | 18 |
| Spaces for reflection, analysis and adaption.....                    | 18 |
| Ambitions for the next two years .....                               | 20 |

## Introduction

### Background: tackling gendered poverty

For 135 years, Smallwood Trust has been helping women across the UK out of poverty through grants and wider support. Smallwood Trust is focussed on enabling women to become financially resilient and thrive economically, meeting the immediate needs of women facing financial insecurity, and looking more widely and the systems that cause gendered poverty.

Smallwood Trust's approach to place-based systems change is rooted in collaboration. It has developed through testing and funding networks of women's organisations to work collaboratively to tackle the root causes of gendered poverty in their place. This began with one network being funded in 2018 and this approach has now expanded, through the Women's Sector Resilience Fund 2, to fund a further two place-based networks. Through this programme, Smallwood Trust hopes to support and upskill local partners to make systemic change, work collaboratively, and share best practice.

This also sits within Smallwood Trust's Gendered Poverty Learning Programme, which aims to bring about and share key learning about how a place-based systems change approach can shift gendered poverty.

### Purpose of this report

This report provides an overview of learning that has emerged from the first year of Renaisi's learning partnership with Smallwood Trust and the place-based networks that they have funded, drawing on a range of data sources.<sup>1</sup> At the beginning of this programme, Renaisi facilitated a workshop that brought the networks to reflect on why a place-based systems change approach was needed to tackle gendered poverty and how we would collectively learn from each other throughout the programme. In this workshop they identified five key elements of a place-based systems change approach to gendered poverty, which this report is structured around:

1. Improving the services and support available for women
2. Developing collaborative relationships and processes
3. Centring the lived experience of women
4. Influencing beyond the networks
5. Ongoing learning and adaptation

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<sup>1</sup> This report draws on data collected via a learning log recording interactions with the networks across September 2022 to December 2023. This included attendance at networks' regular meetings, 1-1 learning discussions with network members, the network's own reporting to Smallwood Trust and facilitated "Learning Network" sessions that have brought together the three funded networks to share learning from their work.

## Who are the women's networks?

### Coventry Women's Partnership

**Coventry Women's Partnership (CWP)** was the first place-based network funded by Smallwood Trust, which they began funding as a three-year pilot in 2018. The Partnership was set up in a response to poor economic outcomes for women in Coventry, and the need to join up women's sector organisations, enable seamless referrals, and create an evidence base through research reports.

The five delivery partners in CWP are:

- **Foleshill Women's Training (FWT)**, who provide women's only education, training, healthcare and employment support services. FWT is the lead partner in the Partnership and has a designated Partnership Manager within the organisation.
- **Coventry Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre (CRASAC)**, who provide specialist support for adults and children who have been impacted by sexual abuse in their lives. They also offer pre-therapy support for women on waiting lists for services.
- **Kairos WWT (Women Working Together)**, provide women-centred, trauma-informed, and holistic support and advocacy to empower women who are subject to or at risk of exploitation, violence or abuse.
- **Coventry Haven Women's Aid (Coventry Haven)**, who support women and children who have been subjected to domestic abuse by providing a range of services including emotional and practical support, FGM advocacy, support through criminal and civil justice processes and safe accommodation.
- **Central England Law Centre – Coventry (CELC)**, who provide free specialist legal advice across a range of social welfare issues to those most in need and use legal processes to fight inequality.

### Their journey so far

In the first three years the partnership set out to help 300 women, but was able to support more than 800 and contribute to the publication of six reports on the impact of the project on the individuals and communities it supported. Women reported substantial and statistically significant improvements in their mental health, physical health, relationships, finances, debt, legal status and housing. Partnership staff also reported that increased collaboration, more effective referrals and greater knowledge of partner services had improved the quality of services and, as a result, also outcomes for women.

The evidence from CWP has shown that place-based collaboration is impactful but requires effective resourcing. This evidence led Smallwood Trust to continue funding the Partnership. For almost seven years now, the Coventry-based organisations have been working together to provide a holistic, joined up, and needs-led service for women in the area.

The learning from CWP also inspired a new place-based funding programme – the Women's Sector Resilience Fund Phase 2 – to support further networks led by and for women to make change to the systems that cause gendered poverty in their area.

## Birmingham No Recourse to Public Funds Women's Support Network

**Birmingham No Recourse to Public Funds Women's Support Network** came together to address the needs of women in Birmingham with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) who are experiencing domestic abuse. The Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network aims to holistically support women with NRPF, maximise resources by promoting inter-agency response and referral pathways and amplify their voices to create an evidence base for systems change.

The six members of the Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network are:

- **Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid (BSWA)**, who are the lead partner for the network, provide specialist Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) support services.
- **The Refugee and Migrant Centre (RMC)**, who provide free casework, advice and guidance on immigration, housing/homelessness/destitution, welfare, education and health.
- **Central England Law Centre – Coventry (CELC)**, who provide free specialist legal advice across a range of social welfare issues to those most in need and use legal processes to fight inequality.
- **Baobab Women's Project**, who advocate with refugee and migrant women in the West Midlands, platforming women's voices and inspiring change in partnership with others.
- **Roshni**, who support Black and minoritised communities affected by domestic abuse by working with survivors through their journey to safety, confidence and independence to live free from violence, abuse and fear.
- **British Red Cross**, who help refugees adjust to life in the UK in through a range of services, including providing emergency provision within the partnership.

### Their journey so far

In the first year they have developed a smooth referral pathway across partners to ensure women can access support for a range of complex needs, which they believe will reduce the likelihood of women falling into homelessness and destitution. Importantly, this will also avoid the need for women to repeat their stories of trauma to multiple agencies. The Network plans to influence wider practice, process and policy around NRPF and domestic abuse through highlighting best practices, sharing case studies showing how the system is broken, and continuously challenging bad practices so that NRPF women are treated fairly, with dignity and respect. The Network has also convened a NRPF Advisory Group of women with lived experience this year, to ensure that their voices have a central role in their internal and external influencing.

### Women of Wythenshawe

**Women of Wythenshawe (WoW)** has brought together women across Wythenshawe to set shared ambitions for women in their place to reduce poverty and improve wellbeing.

Their approach is focused on building the confidence and skills of women experiencing multiple disadvantages to support them to coproduce and advocate for their ambitions for systems change in the local area.

At the end of their first year of funding there were 12 WoW member groups<sup>2</sup> that are supported by 9 VCSE organisations:

| WoW members  | Supported by:                              |
|--|--|
| Women leaders from <b>Better Things</b> : an informal service user/ambassadors group focused on peer support and awareness raising for/with people with learning disabilities and autism                                   | <b>Better Things</b>                       |
| Committee members of <b>Bright Futures Friends</b> : a newly constituted women's group focused on peer support for SEND children and parents   | <b>Woodhouse Park Family Centre/WCI</b>    |
| Committee members of <b>Dandelion Savers</b> : a newly constituted women-led Community Savers affiliate focused on peer support and poverty action   | <b>The Dandelion Community &amp; CLASS</b> |
| Women leaders/volunteers from <b>FreshStart Smart's</b> Thursday drop-in: an informal women's group focused on peer support, low cost food provision & health and wellbeing  | <b>FreshStart Smart</b>                    |
| Women leaders & volunteers from <b>Know Africa</b> : an informal women's group focused on peer support, signposting, & cultural awareness  | <b>Know Africa</b>                         |
| Women leaders & volunteers from <b>Lifted Carers</b> : an informal group focused on peer support, information, signposting and advocacy for/with Carers  | <b>Lifted Carers Centre</b>                |
| Committee members of <b>Mums Mart</b> : a local women's group est. 2014 focused on peer support and poverty action   | <b>CLASS</b>                               |
| Women leaders from <b>Olive Pathway</b> : an informal former service user group focused on peer support for survivors of abuse.  | <b>Olive Pathway</b>                       |
| Women leaders from <b>SEND Together</b> : an informal group linked to a weekly drop-in focused on peer support, information and signposting for parents of children with SEND  | <b>Caritas Shrewsbury</b>                  |
| Committee members of <b>SENSitive</b> : an established but newly constituted women's group focused on peer support, information and signposting for parents of children with SEND  | <b>CLASS</b>                               |
| Women leaders from the <b>Well Women</b> project: an informal group linked to a weekly drop-in focused on peer support, healthy eating and arts and crafts with/for women refugees/women seeking asylum and their children | <b>Caritas Shrewsbury</b>                  |

<sup>2</sup> Note that since this report was written FreshStart Smart and Olive Pathway have left the WoW network on amicable terms due to a lack of capacity to engage and Safe Spots, a local domestic violence service has joined as a VCSE support organisation.

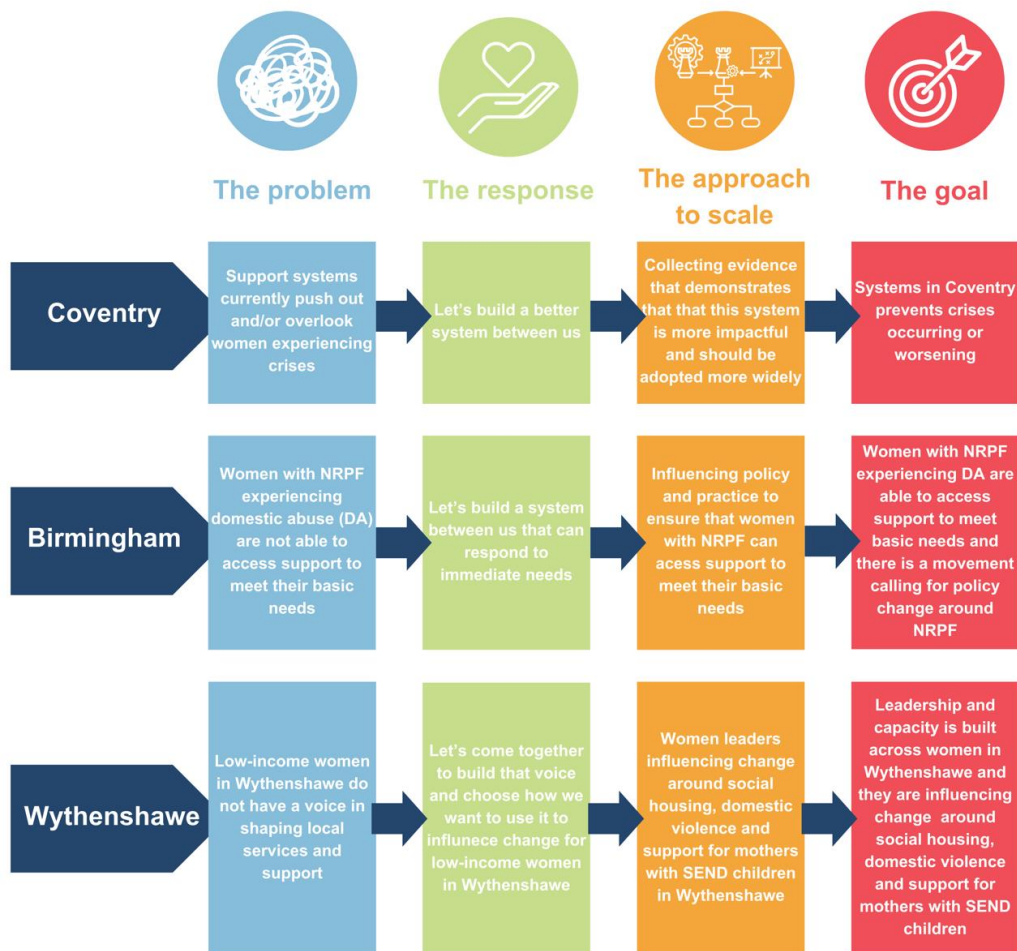
**Wythenshawe Women’s Welfare Association:** a newly constituted women’s group focused on healthy relationships; health & wellbeing; and peer support

**CLASS (WCHG in Y1)**

The WoW network is coordinated by Community Led Action and Savings Support (CLASS) whose work focuses on supporting, developing and facilitating women-led community and co-production processes focused on poverty reduction.

### Their journey so far

In their first year WoW has brought women into conversation with each other. This dialogue aims to identify critical challenges that are holding women in poverty, prioritise issues that are acute or cross-cutting, and co-produce solutions with the professionals who have access to the power and relationships that can enable lasting change. As a result of this process the women leaders in WoW have formed three action groups around housing, domestic abuse and the experiences of mothers with children that have special educational needs or difficulties (SEND). Each action group is now developing their own goals and plans to drive systems change in their area. This approach has been driven from the bottom up through the process of dialogue, peer exchange, confidence building, leadership development and enabling.





## Approach 1: Changing services and support

All three partnerships are motivated by an ambition to make systemic change to women's poverty in their local area, which requires meaningful changes in the experiences that women have engaging with local services and support systems. The approaches that they are taking to drive this change, and the stages they are at in this journey differ across partnerships.

### Joining up referral systems

Both Coventry Women's Partnership and Birmingham NRPF have improved services for women through joint referral systems.

#### How the change was made

For Coventry Women's Partnership, there were two key elements of developing this joined-up service – a shared referral form, and each partner developing a deeper knowledge of each other's services. As part of this referral process, staff across partners can reach out to each other for support and advice about a client while keeping personally identifiable information confidential. In some cases, this conversation will highlight that another service would be more appropriate for the client or can avoid the need for referral at all if the referring partner is able to get sufficient advice around how meet the client's needs. If a referral feels appropriate on all sides (most importantly to the woman herself) they will refer the case details while continuing to maintain their relationship with the woman they initially engaged with as much as the woman would like. The process aims to ensure that women feel they are engaging with one, holistic offer rather than being passed from service to service.

*“Previously you might refer someone and not really know what happened with the referral or it might bounce back and you don't know why – but now you can have a human conversation with someone who's familiar with your services... and unpick what kind of support they might be able to offer or why it might be unsuitable”*  
*Interview with a CWP partner, March 2023*

Similarly, in its first year the Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network has developed a joint referral system for women experiencing domestic abuse with No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF). They collaboratively developed a common referral form and created a shared drive where each partner can access information on the others' referral pathways.

#### What is joining up referral systems leading to

Coventry Women's Partnership's approach to joining-up services has improved the support available for vulnerable and marginalized women. Case studies and outcomes data from CWP show that the development of smooth referral pathways between partners has been particularly effective in supporting women experiencing complex, intersecting challenges. These challenges may include experiencing domestic abuse without access to benefits due

to immigration status, challenges navigating the benefits system due to disabilities, language barriers, trauma, or long-term health conditions. Partners believe that these women were previously often 'lost in the system' when they had to self-refer or were referred to a service that was inappropriate, which led to their crisis worsening.

In Birmingham, the Network feels that their new approach to referral pathways has reduced the burden on women to navigate a range of services and ensures that referrals can happen quickly and without any gap in support. Partners are seeing this begin to overcome a previously common issue of vulnerable women losing trust and disengaging with services when they encounter any resistance or delays. Coming together as a network has enabled staff to feel more confident to make referrals due to a greater degree of trust in each other's services.

**Key learning:** Women's experience of poverty is often driven by a range of different issues that can require different sets of expertise to respond to. Building a referral system that enables a woman to access these services easily, with a consistent experience of care throughout is critical to support those in crises.

## Building the capacity of women in their place

A key part of the Women of Wythenshawe approach has included capacity building activities for women leaders to improve their access to information and confidence.

### How the change was made

The Women of Wythenshawe (WoW) network is focused on building the capacity of women leaders in the network to both deliver and advocate for better services and support for women. In response to the WoW women leaders' collective realisation that many women are unable to access information about how to navigate support and entitlements, WoW leaders have developed a two-year training programme and plan to develop a directory of support for women in the area (the WoW Handbook) to provide them with the information, connectivity and confidence to provide peer-support and signpost other women in their groups and communities. The WoW training programme has included developing a partnership with Benchill Community Centre to run a digital skills course for WoW leaders. The women leaders have also received training from On Our Radar on a community reporting methodology, to develop skills and confidence to engage with a range of audiences around the key issues impacting women, and capture and tell effective and influential stories to a variety of audiences.

### What is capacity building leading to

The process of bringing women leaders together in WoW has built their confidence and awareness of a greater range of systemic issues facing women in their area, which has enabled them to now select three main focus areas for the network and begin planning how they will approach them (domestic abuse, the needs of mothers with children that have SEND and housing). The WoW leaders will now be engaging with a diverse range of

community members, organisations, local politicians and public sector officials to broaden their understanding of the system and identify opportunities to make systemic change.

*“The information and access to the network groups has increased my knowledge of the work that other groups do and what we can all achieve together...”*

*A WoW leader's reflection on the Network meetings in the WoW Annual Report, September 2023*

As the leaders' confidence, skills and clarity around what they can collectively change in the system is growing, new ideas about the skills and capacities they want to develop to put this into action are emerging. For example, a group of leaders from the WoW action group that is focused on the experiences of mothers with children that have special educational needs and difficulties (SEND) will be trained on how to establish a social enterprise so they can establish a Community Interest Company (CIC) to deliver experience-led training to schools.

**Key learning:** Women's solidarity, self-help and community action is a powerful mechanism to ensure that there are support systems for women experiencing poverty. Enabling women to build practical skills and confidence to advocate for themselves and support others with similar experiences strengthens the support available for women.

## Sharing skills, knowledge and expertise

The Coventry Women's Partnership and Birmingham NRPF have both focused on supporting all staff members to deepen their understanding of a range of women's needs and be able to offer more holistic support through inter-organisational training.

### How the change was made

Both the Coventry Women's Partnership (CWP) and Birmingham NRPF Network have developed a training programme in which each partner organisation delivers training to staff from across the full partnership in their area of expertise. In CWP this inter-organisational training programme has been ongoing throughout their seven years of working together, with staff receiving training around how to respond to issues including immigration, housing, legal rights, cultural sensitivity, sexual violence, domestic abuse, sexual exploitation, financial stability and employment.

In their first year of delivery, the Birmingham NRPF Network has developed a similar capacity building plan that they are beginning to implement, considering the format, length and frequency of the trainings to ensure they can provide space for both skills development and relationship building while acknowledging the pressures that staff delivering frontline crisis support face. Alongside developing the capacity building plan, the Network has launched a “Practitioner's Forum” that brings frontline staff together for quarterly in-person meetings to build relationships, share insights about the experiences of women with NRPF and identify where cross-partner training could support improved practice across the network.

## What is inter-organisational training leading to

This approach to creating spaces for partners' to learn from each other's specialism has supported staff to have the knowledge and skills to offer holistic advice to women using their services and refer them to the appropriate service where needed.

In CWP staff have reflected that the training has supported them to have a deeper understanding of the range of issues that a vulnerable woman might experience outside of their specialism. The sharing of knowledge and expertise has also led to some partners making internal changes to their service delivery. For example, one partner has established a dedicated referrals person to work across their teams, while another has expanded the range of provision they offer to women in crisis to include items identified as critical by the partnership.

*“Thanks to our learnings from the others, every staff member is trained to issue [food bank vouchers], we have female hygiene products all over the centre. Our understanding of the experience of women's poverty has come far within the organisation”*  
*Interview with a CWP partner in Building a better system for women in Coventry Report, June 2023*

While it is too early to identify the impact of joint capacity building in the Birmingham Network at this stage, it is already beginning to enable shifts in individual partners support for women with NRPF. Partners have shared that access to interpreters has been easier through working in partnership with Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid (BSWA). The Refugee and Migrant Centre (RMC) has also seen an increase in referrals from women with NRPF and had more disclosures around experiences of domestic abuse, which they believe is linked to women knowing that they will be able to access specialist domestic abuse services through BSWA or Roshni. Partners have also shared that their closer working has enabled them to organically lean more on each other's expertise when thinking about improvements to their service delivery. For example, separate to the work directly in the partnership, BSWA undertook an internal review of their work with NRPF to make sure the right systems were in place, and shared that ongoing discussions with Baobab supported them to think differently about the role of lived experience voice within this.

**Key learning:** Creating space for staff across organisations to both formally and informally learn from each other's specialisms and approaches improves enables each organisation to deliver more holistic, women-centred services as they are more aware of a range of issues that might be driving a woman's experience and can give the women they are working with confidence that they will ensure that they can access support for that range of issues.

## Approach 2: Collaborative relationships and processes

All three networks have focused on building and strengthening collaborative relationships and processes across members, who include women leaders, staff members and organisations. This section summarises what has worked well in supporting the networks to build deep collaboration in their approach to place-based systems change.

### Investing in relationship development

#### Developing foundational relationships

The Women of Wythenshawe (WoW) Network highlighted the importance of five months of relationship building across the groups prior to the first network meeting. Included the co-ordinating partners (Community Savers and the local women's saving group Mum's Mart) visiting all the women's groups individually. The co-ordinating partners also supported women leaders from each group to visit other groups in the network to understand the experiences and aspirations of different women in Wythenshawe. This time devoted to building 1-1 relationships and a common understanding of the WoW network in early stages set a foundation for trust and openness when the group convened in the first network meeting in March 2023. Spending time and energy on building trust and openness has been crucial to enable the WoW network to move into co-producing their plans and ambitions for how to improve outcomes for local women experiencing poverty. Since the first meeting, the bi-monthly WoW network meetings have continued to devote time to relationship building alongside planning. The first three meetings created space for leaders to learn from each other about their experiences, developing a shared awareness of the diversity of issues faced by women in their area alongside building trust.

*“Leaders managed to build amazing relationships of trust especially when they shared their personal life stories and journeys”  
A support agency in WoW's Annual report, September 2023*

The Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network has also found that coming together in-person has supported collaborative working. Bringing in external support from Renaisi and the New Economics Foundation (NEF) in the first six months of the Network to facilitate in-person workshops that brought partners together to map out their local system, reflect on ambitions for influencing and think through their journey of change supported the development of a sense of partnership and built a sense of shared mission across the network. These spaces ensured that there was time devoted to being together in one room at the beginning of the partnership to think through shared ambitions and perspectives on the need for systems change, shaping relationships and alignment in purpose that have made coordination smoother as the network's delivery has progressed.

*“(The events) have provided the space for the network partners to build on our relationships and identify gaps in our communication”  
Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network Interim report, March 2023*

## How this can influence change

Being six years into formalised collaboration, those in the Coventry Women's Partnership have reflected that devoting time to the development of relationships that go beyond transactional, professional interactions has supported them to deliver better support for women.

Devoting time to ensure that staff understands each partner's distinct offers and individual referral processes, alongside knowing the names of key staff in partner organisations has enabled what they term a "warm referral process". Partners shared that they now will pick up the phone and call frontline workers or the partnership manager whenever they need advice around the needs of a service user before making a referral. This has both saved staff time in processing referrals, as there are less inappropriate requests, and improved women's experiences of accessing multiple services, as they are only referred when a service genuinely meets their needs and are not expected to repeat any information to new caseworkers unless they wish to.

The relationships developed through CWP have led partners to move away from viewing each other as competitors for funding, and begin seeking out further joint funding opportunities, alongside supporting each other to bid for funding where their own organisation is not appropriate. For example, Kairos and Coventry Haven submitted a successful joint bid to Homeless Link drawing on evidence of their effective collaboration in CWP.

*"The opportunity to take time to invest in building relationships is a real luxury and something to take back and share further within our groups"*

*Feedback from a WoW member in 6-month report, April 2023*

**Key learning:** Devoting time to 1-1 relationship development in early stages of a network forming is critical to effective collaboration. This has enabled the networks to implement previously mentioned improvements in referral processes effectively, come together around a shared understanding of the need for systems change, and develop the confidence needed to advocate for change.

## Clear coordination and structure

Each network has developed different ways of organising their partnership structure to serve the purposes of the network.

### Central vs distributed coordination

In the Coventry Women's Partnership (CWP) central coordination was led by a partnership manager who has been the primary point of contact for partners, co-ordinated meetings and training sessions that brought partners together and supported the referral process when it became complex due to women accessing many services at the same time. Partners have shared that having this wholly funded, central role was critical in bringing the partnership together to develop and implement the referral process. As CWP's referral

process has become embedded and their focus has shifted to think about external influence, the partnership manager's role has also shifted into a focus on awareness raising and relationship building. Having a central partnership role in this new phase of CWP's work has enabled them to always have a voice for the partnership on key local forums where other partners might not have capacity.

Similarly, the Birmingham NRPF network has found central coordination key in developing a regular rhythm of partnership meetings for both strategic and frontline staff. While it was not initially set out as their role, as the lead partner Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid (BSWA) have taken on a coordination role through setting meetings, agendas and leading on minute-taking.

## Community-led governance

The Women of Wythenshawe network has aimed to develop a network structure which would ensure that women from the local area were leading activity, rather than the staff at participating organisations. This way of working was a break from the norm for many participating organisations. It has required building structures that support accountability to the principle of women-leadership and ongoing reflection about if this is being upheld. For example, after the first WoW Steering Group meeting, participating women leaders raised concerns that the membership was dominated by organisational staff. In response to this, the coordinating partner facilitated the development of a member's agreement, set of principles and structure that ensured Steering Group membership included one support worker and one leader from each WoW member group. This member's agreement clearly sets out that the Steering Group holds accountability for ensuring that women leaders are supported to participate in the WoW and funds are spent appropriately, rather than directing WoW activities. The direction of WoW's plans, activities and ambitions are coproduced in full WoW network that bring together women leaders without the presence of any staff that are not support workers.

The development of this structure has been critical to support WoW's community-led approach but has also led some local women's organisations to self-exclude due to not feeling able to commit to consistency supporting a service user to participate in the network. This was particularly the case for some local organisations focusing on crisis response, such as those working with women experiencing domestic abuse.

**Key learning:** The structure of the network should be suited to the approach it aims to take to systems change and collectively agreed by partners. This is likely to shift and adapt throughout the journey as priorities and needs adapt so partnerships should be attentive to if their structure fits their needs.

## Approach 3: Centring lived experience

While the approaches that each network is taking to engage the voice of women with lived experience of poverty are different, all three focus on taking a women-led approach to make lasting change to the experiences of women in their place. This section summarises the different approaches, and the learning that has emerged so far about how to make them work well.

### Creating spaces for storytelling and solidarity

The Women of Wythenshawe network has taken shape through women with experience of gendered poverty in the area coming together tell their share their stories and collectively identify what needs to change. Network members shared that creating space in the first few meetings for joint storytelling and listening built their confidence around speaking in the group and raised ambitions around what the network could achieve, building their capacity to identify and design possible interventions.

*“Our leaders managed to build amazing relationships of trust especially when they shared their personal life stories and journeys – it enabled them to gain so much self-confidence”  
A support agency in WoW’s Annual report, September 2023*

The Birmingham NRP Women’s Support Network has developed a NRP Advisory Group, that is led by and managed by women with lived experience of domestic abuse and immigration law, to ensure that guidance from women with lived experience of having No Recourse to Public Funds is centred in their work. Being in its early stages, the facilitator has held an open space for women to build relationships, share their stories and define what they want from the group. Women have used the group to seek advice from others going through similar experiences and identify areas where they would benefit from additional training and support. They have shared that hearing others’ stories has both made them feel less isolated and has given them hope and practical support around navigating the migration system.

The Coventry Women’s Partnership have also found Foleshill Women’s Training’s (FWT) women-only support groups have been critical safe spaces for women to come together and discuss their issues and needs. Having these unstructured and women-led spaces have allowed the partnership to understand changing and emerging needs of women experiencing poverty and multiple forms of disadvantage.

**Key learning:** Effectively engaging the voice of women with lived experience of gendered poverty requires going in without a set agenda and creating space for them to share their experiences with each other, build solidarity, and self-identify what they (individually and collectively) need to create change.

### Listening with openness to change

In Coventry, coming together as a multi-agency partnership has allowed partner to adopt a woman-led approach in their service delivery, rather than being led by the organisation’s



specialism. This has included shifting to allow caseworkers to continue to hold the relationship with an individual woman that they have been supporting to manage their access to other services across the partnership, rather than ending this relationship with a referral, unless that is what the women prefers. It has included a focus on ensuring culturally sensitive, multilingual service provision based on women's feedback that this has been critical for women to feel able to disclose experiences of trauma.

The Birmingham NRPF Network aims to work with the Advisory Group to support them to influence change by informing other local stakeholders about the issues experienced by women with NRPF and how to provide appropriate support. However, the group's members have highlighted that this will be a slow process and might not be appropriate for every woman in the group. Taking a genuinely co-productive approach means that the network has been guided by what the women in the Advisory Group want to get out of the group, rather than the network's initial ideas for what it would achieve. So far, adapting the structure of the Advisory Group in line with women's feedback has practically included:

- Focusing on first ensuring that everyone in the group has their basic needs met (e.g. food, housing, money, legal, advice etc.);
- Paying women for their attendance rather than just providing vouchers for transport and lunch, as women fed back that the £10 a week per session gave them more power to make choices about how they spend it
- Providing information in four languages and having translation on site;
- Supporting women to access ESOL classes;
- Facilitating the co-design of a training and development plan for the group.

Being led by women leaders with lived experience of poverty in Wythenshawe has required the organisations in Women of Wythenshawe to adapt and change plans in line with women's ambitions. Over the past year, WoW has learnt that building spaces for trust and solidarity has required both sometimes excluding staff members from the room to ensure that women with lived experience are able to truly represent their experiences, but also sometimes ensuring that trusted support workers are on hand to ensure those with SEND and translation needs feel able to contribute effectively. Being led by the women leaders has meant that CLASS's support as the coordinating partner has had to adapt to the women's ambitions for WoW. For example, CLASS had initially thought that there would only be capacity for two action groups within WoW and suggested that the Domestic Abuse and Housing groups combine to examine how these issues intersect. However, as this was met with a determined response from the women leaders in Domestic Abuse action group that they continue separately, CLASS will continue to ensure there is support for all three action groups, despite this meaning they have to rethink how capacity is allocated to coordination.

**Key learning:** Being genuinely guided by the voice of women with lived experience of gendered poverty requires being open to change plans, approaches, capacity and service provision in line with what they believe is needed.

## Approach 4: Influencing beyond the networks

All three networks aim to influence systems change beyond the system that they have created within the networks, to change the experiences that women have within their places. This area has been a challenge for some organisations, where the focus of capacity on frontline, crisis focused service provision leaves little scope for advocacy and influencing. As a result of this, the networks are largely building influencing into existing plans, as summarised below.

### Building relationships with power holders

As part of their shift to a focus on influencing their local system, the Coventry Women's Partnership (CWP) developed a wider steering group has been developed to strengthen the strategic reach of the partnership, bringing in representation from the DWP, Crisis, Coventry City Council, the local housing association Green Square Accord, Citizens' Advice and Grapevine, a local community-development charity. This is beginning to improve practice across the wider steering group members, who reflected that being connected to CWP has enabled them to use evidence around how to provide gender-sensitive and trauma informed services to improve their own practice. For example, one organisation had introduced a domestic violence champion after being able to access domestic abuse training from CWP.

CWP also views political influence as a key mechanism for systemic change to service provision in Coventry and has a focussed strategy around engaging and influencing local political decision-makers. This has included regular meetings with three MPs in Coventry which are used to communicate their understanding of and evidence around emerging needs for women across constituencies, alongside advocating for wider adoption of CWP's model. They have used research carried out by the Women's Budget Group to inform these meetings, such as sharing evidence around the gaps that exist within Children's Services.

Similarly, the Women of Wythenshawe (WoW) network is building relationships across local voluntary sector organisations, politicians and public sector officials to influence change. In their support and coordination role, CLASS has mapped out partner organisations' networks and connections across the local area that might be relevant to the three action groups and begun engaging with key local power holders from Wythenshawe and Greater Manchester. Following this, they are connecting women leaders with these stakeholders to build their understanding of the role these stakeholders play in the system, present their ambitions for change and understand how they might bring stakeholders into the work to influence change. The women are also using community reporter methodology to investigate the three issues in more depth via interviews with key local agencies and decision-makers to understand the local system in more detail, interrogate root causes of issues and identify opportunities for change.

**Key learning:** Developing formal mechanisms for engagement with key VCSE and public sector stakeholder in the system is a key mechanism to build the relationships needed to influence change.

## Improving sector practice

The organisational partners in both the Birmingham NRPF Network and Coventry Women's Partnership have ongoing engagement with statutory partners, that they use to influence better practice. This includes day-to-day engagement with statutory partners that they refer clients onto, attendance at statutory led forums, such as the Domestic Abuse and VAWG Strategy Groups and where partner deliver training for other services to support better practice. For example, the CELC shared that they delivered a training about migration law to the Birmingham Children's Trust that included over 100 social workers, which aimed to improve their approach to migration issues.

Over their seven years of delivery, the Coventry Women's Partnership's has increased awareness of women's experiences and available services across the voluntary sector in Coventry. External stakeholders in their wider steering group reflected that CWP's advocacy has shifted a "one size fits all" mentality in service provision and supported the sector to recognise the need for collaboration with other services to provide effective and holistic support for those with multiple needs.

*"On the ground we're beginning to see more conscious thinking on how work in the area impacts women specifically... There's a lot going on around getting an accurate picture of the number of women experiencing homelessness and domestic violence that will make a big difference in the future"*

*Member of the CWP wider steering group, Building a better system for women in Coventry Report, June 2023*

**Key learning:** Building in messaging and advocacy around best practice into "business as usual" engagement with external stakeholders is a valuable influencing tool - as there are often more touchpoints that first comes to mind.

## Advocating for policy change

While all three of the networks believe national and local policy is a root cause of many of the issues that drive gendered poverty, partners have reflected that influencing this often feels out of their control. To shift this the Birmingham NRPF Network is focused on supporting CELC to engage in strategic litigation, where they use a particular case or incident to highlight why current policy is flawed and push for policy and/or legal change. Pursuing these individual cases, which often highlight a wider experience of when the system fails a group of women, is a mechanism through which the Birmingham NRPF can influence policy change.

As part of their influencing work, the Coventry Women's partnership has been campaigning for a new cabinet role specifically for women's voices, which they believe would be critical to ensure a gendered lens in local policy. They launched a petition around this which unfortunately did not get enough signatures to be passed, but it still remains a key goal for the partnership.

*“The Cabinet Member would work with local organisations and women to ensure women’s voices are heard and reflected in impactful policy changes, with the needs of women at the core of local politics and decision making.”*

*Christine McNaught, FWT, Building a better system for women in Coventry Report, June 2023*

**Key learning:** Focusing on targeted areas where the partnership has the skills and relationships to influence policy, such as through strategic litigation, is an effective way to influence an area that often feels far out of reach.

## Supporting women’s voice

The Women of Wythenshawe approach to influencing change focuses on supporting women leaders to design and advocate for the change they want to see. Their approach summarised in previous sections of this report has been effective in achieving this to date with women leaders expressing increased knowledge of the system and confidence in articulating their experiences of what need to change. While it is too early to identify the impact that this will have on wider policy and practice around women in Wythenshawe, we have seen a group of leaders form that are determined to make change.

*“Leaders are more confident, able to reflect their opinions and discuss their problems”.*

*A support agency in WoW’s Annual report, September 2023*

As mentioned previously, while the NRPF Advisory group was initially created with a view to it having an influencing and community engagement role, those in the group will ultimately determine whether they would like to have that role, and how they would like to do it. The network believes that the voices of women with lived experience will be able to influence statutory, public and voluntary services and engage community members around NRPF and domestic abuse by building awareness of women’s experiences and the need for tailored services alongside engaging community members that would not access institutional spaces for support. However, whether and how this is progressed will depend on the women in the NRPF Advisory Groups preferences and ambitions.

**Key learning:** The network’s approaches to building the capacity of women with lived experience to advocate for change has the potential to influence wider systemic change, both through the messages that these women bring to external stakeholders and through their approach to leading from their own experiences.

## Approach 5: Collective learning and adaptation

In early stages of their collaborative work to make systemic change to gendered poverty in their places, all three networks are developing learning and adaptation processes that support this. As the work continues and these take shape, we will continue to draw out any learning from the process of learning itself as a mechanism for systemic change.

### Monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) processes

The Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network both collects data on the women engaged in their services through monitoring forms and have recruited a data analyst to support the partnership to use this effectively. Going forward they would like to deepen the data they are capturing, which currently speaks mostly to wellbeing information, through capturing additional information how a women's holistic needs are being met, such as through housing and financial outcomes. As they progress into their second year of delivery, they intend to collectively review and developing their MEL approach to ensure it connects to their Theory of Change.

The Women of Wythenshawe network has focused on effective documentation of stories shared and shifting dynamics across network meetings, to ensure that learning from the process is captured and women have evidence of how their voices have contributed to decision-making. Alongside this, they capture learning through quarterly reflective practice interviews with the women leaders. Going forward, as the WoW Action Groups develop their action plans, WoW plans to work with Renaisi to develop and implement a learning framework to measure change and embed learning.

Developing MEL processes has been an ongoing focus throughout CWP's work. Partners each collect their own outcomes data in line with their specialism, alongside feeding into a joint reporting form. For the first three years of CWP, MEL was supported by the Women's Budget Group, who oversaw its early evaluation and produced policy briefings to highlight the impact of public policy on the lives of service users involved in the project. Since then, CWP has worked with Renaisi to develop a learning report on the partnership, bringing together data across partner organisations and carry out learning interviews.

**Key learning:** All three networks have a strong focus on capturing learning and evaluating the impact of their work to make the case for wider adoption of their approach to tackling gendered poverty.

### Spaces for reflection, analysis and adaption

Both the Birmingham NRPF Network and WoW action groups have engaged with systems mapping to collectively reflect on the issues across their local system, understand complex interactions between different actors, policies, laws and organisations, and identify opportunities for change. In Birmingham, the NRPF Network's systems mapping workshop

brought the partnership together with key local stakeholders, which enabled it to support a collective recognition of what good practice should look like, and what in the system needs to be shifted to allow this to happen. Partners shared that the activity supported them to understand each other's specialisms more deeply and where they sit in the system more deeply, to identify shared activities that would make their collective efforts stronger than the sum of their parts. Similarly for Women of Wythenshawe, leaders shared that coming together to map out the issues and actors in the local systems around domestic abuse, housing and women with children with SEND has both reinforced their belief in the need for change and clarified where their efforts could be most impactful.

*“(the events) have allowed us the time and space to focus on the issues we wish to target, looking at issues, needs, potential partners, stakeholders ... and how we can ensure the network and its learning can be sustained so that the skill and good practice in the city isn't lost.”*

*Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network Interim report, March 2023*

Alongside this, the Birmingham NRPF Network, alongside Smallwood Trust and Renaisi, have begun testing a new reporting approach that focuses on collective reflection and learning rather than accountability. While previously BWSA developed and submitted bi-yearly reports to Smallwood Trust, going forward the network will come together in a space with Smallwood Trust and facilitated by Renaisi to all reflect shared achievements and future goals, which will then be written up by Smallwood Trust as a report that captures all voices.

**Key learning:** In early phases of their work, holding space for collective reflection and analysis of the local system has supported the networks to plan and build a shared understanding of the need for change.

## Ambitions for the next two years

This programme has set out to support the development of networks that can change the systems driving gendered poverty in their area. In this approach to funding, Smallwood Trust aims to improve the services and support available to women experiencing poverty alongside learning about how to deliver funding in a way that supports long-term, deep rooted, systemic change. This has included testing new approaches to monitoring and reporting that shift the burden off grantees, making longer term commitments to funding and providing capacity support to grantees alongside funding in areas including learning and evaluation, systems mapping, influencing and data capture.

Over the next two years of our learning partnership, we will continue to use our embeddedness in the programme to capture and analyse observational data about what is and is not working well across the three place-based networks and in Smallwood Trust's funding practice. Through holding spaces for collective learning, reflection and adaptation across the programme and sharing learning externally, we aim to ensure that this programme can build an evidence base for how to drive place-based systems change in the women's sector and develop three resilient networks driving this change in their place.

### What's next for each network?

#### Birmingham NRPF Women's Support Network

With a regular drumbeat of meetings established across partners, the joint referral process in action, and the NRPF Women's Advisory group recruited, the Birmingham NRPF Network's key priorities for the remainder of their current funding are to:

- Continue to implement their inter-organisational capacity building plan, encouraging wider staff to engage and benefit from the expertise of the Network
- Increase awareness of the work of the Network and the issues around NRPF and domestic abuse across partners and local stakeholders, through a shared influencing and communications approach
- Continue to facilitate the NRPF Women's Advisory Group to support the women's ambitions for engagement with the network, including working with members who would like to take a more active role in network influencing and community engagement to support them to take on those roles
- Establish a multi-agency hub where the Network could be based, building on the effective referral process that have been put in place this past year.

#### Women of Wythenshawe

With the first year of the Women of Wythenshawe network having established three women-led action groups around social housing, domestic violence and mothers with SEND children, this next year will see these groups develop their action plans and begin implementing their approach to local systems change. While it is too early to set out the action groups' key priorities at this stage, overarching goals for WoW over the next two years are likely to include:

- Building capacity in WoW member groups around skills such as financial management, fundraising, social media, safeguarding, fundraising and community reporting
- Develop a directory that will ensure that women in Wythenshawe can access the information, support and services they need
- Engaging with Manchester City Council's neighbourhoods' team and local councillors to influence the development planning processes in Wythenshawe, particularly relating to the development of social housing
- Improve teenagers' understanding Coercive Control as a form of domestic abuse
- Increasing the understanding and skills of schools across Wythenshawe to work effectively with children with Special Educational Needs, possibly through the development of a social enterprise development that can carry this out.

## Coventry Women's Partnership

Entering into their seventh year of work together, the Coventry Women's Partnership will continue to deliver the joined-up system of services that they have developed while shifting to focus on using their approach to influence wider change. In the next two years of their current funding their key priorities are to:

- Consider how to increase partner capacity, including scoping viability of sharing caseworkers across the partnership;
- Develop methods for continued engagement of wider stakeholders and strategic leads across sectors to centre women's voices and experiences, including reviewing the role of their wider steering group, membership of varied strategic forums, working groups and focus groups and work with MP's across Coventry;
- Explore how to collect and use data to evidence the long-term impact of CWP services, alongside continuing to use ongoing monitoring evaluation and learning data to understand the impact and learning from the partnership.

## What have we learnt about place-based systems change?

### Key learning from a year of funding women's networks (2022-23)

#### How are the networks developing holistic services and support for women?

- Women's experience of poverty is often driven by a range of different issues that can require different sets of expertise to respond to. Building a referral system that enables women to access these services easily, with a consistent experience of care throughout is critical to support those in crises.
- Women's solidarity, self-help and community action is a powerful mechanism to ensure that there are support systems for women experiencing poverty. Enabling women to build practical skills and confidence to advocate for themselves and support others with similar experiences strengthens the support available for women.
- Creating space for staff across organisations to both formally and informally learn from each other's specialisms and approaches improves and enables each organisation to deliver more holistic, women-centred services as they are more aware of a range of issues that might be driving a woman's experience and can give the women they are working with confidence that they will ensure that they can access support for that range of issues.



**What has supported the networks to collaborate effectively?**

- Devoting time to 1-1 relationship development in early stages of a network forming is critical to effective collaboration. This has enabled the networks to implement previously mentioned improvements in referral processes effectively, come together around a shared understanding of the need for systems change, and develop the confidence needed to advocate for change.
- The structure of the network should be suited to the approach it aims to take to systems change and collectively agreed by partners. This is likely to shift and adapt throughout the journey as priorities and needs adapt so partnerships should be attentive to if their structure fits their needs.

**How are the networks engaging women with lived experience in their approach?**

- Effectively engaging the voice of women with lived experience of gendered poverty requires going in without a set agenda and creating space for them to share their experiences with each other, build solidarity, and self-identify what they (individually and collectively) need to create change.
- Being genuinely guided by the voice of women with lived experience of gendered poverty requires being open to change plans, approaches, capacity and service provision in line with what they believe is needed.

**What is supporting the networks to influence externally?**

- Developing formal mechanisms for engagement with key VCSE and public sector stakeholder in the system is a key mechanism to build the relationships needed to influence change.
- Building in messaging and advocacy around best practice into "business as usual" engagement with external stakeholders is a valuable influencing tool - as there are often more touchpoints that first comes to mind.
- Focusing on targeted areas where the partnership has the skills and relationships to influence policy, such as through strategic litigation, is an effective way to influence an area that often feels far out of reach.
- The network's approaches to building the capacity of women with lived experience to advocate for change has the potential to influence wider systemic change, both through the messages that these women bring to external stakeholders and through their approach to leading from their own experiences.

**What are the networks doing to collectively learn and adapt?**

- All three networks have a strong focus on capturing learning and evaluating the impact of their work to make the case for wider adoption of their approach to tackling gendered poverty.
- In early phases of their work, holding space for collective reflection and analysis of the local system has supported the networks to plan and build a shared understanding of the need for change.

*Over the next year we will continue to explore the above questions with the networks, capturing and sharing insights to support them to develop their approaches to service delivery, collaboration, lived experience, influencing and learning.*



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