



Brighton Women's Centre
22 Richmond Place
Brighton, BN2 9NA

Making the case for women's only mental health services in Brighton & Hove

Background

BWC (Brighton Women's Centre) has been supporting self-identifying women in Sussex for 50 years, and from the outset, we've provided holistic support to women with a range of mental health needs. We're experts in supporting women from all backgrounds, facing all kinds of issues, to live happier lives.

For the last 5 years, BWC has been commissioned by Southdown to deliver specialist women-only mental health services in Brighton & Hove as part of the UOK partnership. This includes a funding a specialist Mental Health Support Co-ordinator, weekly women's well-being Hubs, and free crèche places which support women with pre-school children to access support at BWC. Prior to this, we were commissioned to deliver our therapy service to support women's mental health by BICS. These services ensure that women with complex mental health challenges, particularly those who've experienced trauma and abuse, are able to receive holistic, trauma-informed, mental health support in safe women-only spaces across Brighton & Hove.

This support is vital because women are more likely to report mental ill health than men (this gap is even more pronounced for transgender women), and those with a history of trauma and abuse are at even higher risk of self-harm and suicide. We know that women with complex needs who are most in need of support are most likely to fall through the gaps in statutory provision, so delivering our vital services for disadvantaged women in the city is essential.

The need - Women and mental health: national context

In their 2017 report, the [Mental Health Foundation](#) found that **women are three times more likely to experience common mental health problems than men**. The report found women are: twice as likely to be diagnosed with anxiety; three times more likely to experience PTSD; and four times more likely to suffer an eating disorder ([NHS, 2023](#)).

Throughout their lives, women are more likely to experience hormonal imbalances that affect their mental health. This includes: Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD); Perinatal depression; and the (peri)menopause. All of these changes can trigger severe mental health problems including depression and anxiety.

Statistics show that women are twice as likely to self-harm as men ([YouGov, 2018](#)), and for women in prison the self-harm rates are 7 times that of male prisoners (HMIP, 2022). The highest self-harm rates are seen in young women (16-24 years) with 1 in 4 women in this age group having self-harmed at some point (compared to 1 in 10 young men in this age range). There are gendered differences in the reasons for men and women self-harming. Studies have shown that women are more likely to cite personal reasons such as depression, to avoid negative emotions or for self-

punishment, whilst men were more likely to do so for interpersonal reasons such as relationship breakdown or to prove themselves amongst peers ([Samaritans, 2021](#)).

This highlights the importance of offering unique interventions for men and women when it comes to preventing mental health issues such as self-harm, and why gender specific support is so important for all self-identifying women.

Studies have consistently found that people who self-harm are more likely to make a suicide attempt than people with no history of self-harm, so whilst men are significantly more likely to die by suicide, women are more likely to report having attempted suicide. And, worryingly, some of the sharpest rises in suicide rates in recent years have been amongst young women (ONS 2020).

There's also a strong link between domestic abuse (of which women are [twice as likely](#) to experience) and suicidal thoughts and attempts. Women who've experienced childhood abuse are also more at risk of engaging in self-injurious thoughts and behaviours. Other risk factors for mental ill-health include poverty, substance misuse and homelessness.

Whilst it's important to acknowledge that men may be underrepresented in some of the above figures (due to a lower proportion of men coming forward for support), this does not diminish the unprecedented numbers of women experiencing mental ill health at this time. The statistics above also undoubtedly highlight some extremely worrying trends in women's mental health, particularly amongst younger women.

The prevalence of mental health issues is even more pronounced for transgender women. Recent [research](#) by the University of Manchester has shown that trans women are around 30% more likely to have a long-term mental health condition than cisgender women, and more likely to have unmet health needs due to "poor communication from healthcare professionals and inadequate staff-patient relationships". Trans women are more likely to self-harm due to feelings of anger towards their bodies, because they are more likely to feel isolated or hopeless due to systemic discrimination, and/or facing family conflict ([The Clare Project](#)).

Why gender-specific mental health support is needed in Brighton & Hove:

Brighton & Hove has above average levels of mental health issues and higher rates of suicide deaths ([Brighton & Hove JSNA, 2024](#)). We have pockets of extremely high deprivation in the city and a large disparity between income and the cost of living. Statistics show that women in low-income households are four times more likely to experience domestic violence than women in better off households (ONS, 2018), and **88% of women attending our hubs last year disclosed domestic abuse.**

As mentioned above, women who've experienced trauma and abuse are more likely to develop serious mental health issues, but may be less likely to access NHS mental health services. In the "[What do women in Sussex want from women's health services](#)" report published by NHS Sussex in January 2024, women highlighted the

lack of NHS support for survivors of abuse. Some were reluctant to seek support as they either felt they would not be believed and/or would have to relive their trauma over and over by repeating their story to different healthcare professionals. Others were worried that seeking support with their mental health would trigger involvement from children's services.

One of the key themes that emerged from this report was that women want holistic support, treating them as a whole person rather than a list of symptoms; something which is at the core of BWC's approach. For women who had experienced trauma, a number of themes were present:

- **Women-only environment**
This was particularly important for women who had experienced domestic and/or sexual abuse or other trauma, in order to feel safe enough to open up and build a trusting relationship.
- **Continuity of care**
Women stressed the damaging impact of reliving their trauma over and over again when repeating their story to different healthcare professionals. Seeing the same person at each appointment allows women to build trusted relationships.
- **Trauma-informed care**
Women may have complex feelings around their trauma – fear of not being believed, stigma or embarrassment. It is important to women that they are believed, and that their trauma is recognised and validated.

Women also said they would benefit from:

- Hubs or 'one-stop shops' for women's health where they could access a range of gender-specific support;
- Support groups;
- Services that support them at an early stage – before they reach crisis point.

All of the above supports the case for women's mental health support to be delivered in safe, women-only environments. Women with complex mental health challenges need holistic, trauma-informed support that doesn't just treat a symptom, but which takes time to understand the complexities of their unique circumstances; finding practical ways to help them improve their mental health and wellbeing, one step at a time.

How BWC meets women's needs; a holistic, trauma-informed approach to mental health support.

Our trauma-informed approach and expertise working with women across multiple areas of need means that we are best placed to offer holistic support to women with complex mental health needs in Brighton & Hove. Our services are particularly designed to support and empower women who find it difficult to engage with statutory or other VCSE services due to the complexity of their circumstances, such as overlapping mental and physical health concerns, history of trauma, insecure accommodation, substance misuse or involvement with the criminal justice system. Our services welcome all self-identifying women and we have worked closely with

The Clare Project to develop a person-centred approach to supporting trans women and nonbinary people who feel most comfortable in women only spaces.

BWC meets women's mental health needs in the following ways:

In-depth case work support

Our Mental Health Support Co-ordinator (MHSC) provides 1:1 mental health support for women with complex needs, through building trusting relationships over time, based on meaningful connection and mutual respect. The MHSC works with women to create a plan of positive actions they can take to support their mental health and well-being. Meetings take place in safe, women-only spaces at BWC and elsewhere in Brighton & Hove, or online for those unable to access these venues. Session length and frequency varies to suit each woman and can continue for as long as needed.

As a women's centre, the breadth of our services means we are uniquely placed to support women with a wide range of complex needs, and can refer women on to other services within BWC, or to partner organisations within the VCSE sector and/or statutory services where appropriate.

Weekly well-being Hubs offering signposting, advice and peer support

Our Hubs offer a front door to BWC, where any woman can come to access a range of advice and support in a safe, women-only environment. Staff and volunteers (many of whom have lived experience of the issues women are facing) listen to each woman's needs with empathy, then provide support, information and signposting around a wide range of issues relating to women's health and well-being. We aim to offer long-term, consistent spaces where women know they can keep coming back.

Many women use the Hubs as a way to access other BWC services/support such as counselling and psychotherapy, support around housing/homelessness, our Peer to Peer service, food bank etc, but we also signpost to other specialist organisations in the city (e.g. Oasis, Rise, Survivors Network, The Clare Project etc) or statutory services, where appropriate.

The Hubs also offer an environment where women can meet and make friends, offering mutual peer support from women who may have had similar life experiences to themselves. This reduces isolation and helps women to grow their support network which is so crucial to improving their mental health and wellbeing.

Of the women who accessed our Hubs last year:

- 96% said coming to the Hubs helped them to feel more positive
- 91% increased their social contact and felt more connected to others
- 87% were supported to cope with the challenges in their lives

"The Hubs are great for sharing with other women and company and support. The team are on top of their game for signposting and care" – Service user



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"It's made me feel at ease and have more confidence in myself so I can stand up for myself...and that I have a choice in who I want to see and not in my own life" – Service user

Low-cost childcare

For many of the women we support, we know that childcare is a significant barrier to accessing support with their mental health. Many of the women we work with do not have a support network of family/friends to rely upon for childcare, and can't afford private nursery fees.

ToyBox, our onsite nursery/creche (rated Outstanding by Ofsted in July 2023) exists to ensure women have the childcare they need to be able to access BWC (and/or external) services. ToyBox offers two free drop-in creche places per day, alongside low-cost nursery places for a further 8 children per day, helping women to access other BWC/UOK services that support their mental health.

In the last year alone, ToyBox supported families to access a range of mental health services including perinatal support, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy via the NHS, BWC therapy service, and BWC Musculoskeletal Support service. It also offered vital respite for families with additional health needs to prevent a decline in their wellbeing, and offered bereavement support to one of the children after losing their primary care giver. Without ToyBox, many of these women would have been unable to access this support.

Over the last year BWC has supported 220 women and families with their mental health and wellbeing through one or more of these services. By their nature, our services do not support large numbers of women, because our support is in-depth and bespoke to their individual needs. The depth of our relationships, and the complexity of women's intersectional needs take time to explore and develop. We know that this support makes a real, meaningful and long-lasting impact on the women we work with – making them (and their families) less likely to need to access statutory support further down the line.

By supporting women's mental health, we also help to prevent negative impacts on their children and families, as maternal mental illness has been linked to wide-ranging consequences for children, including worse physical and mental health, behavioural problems and poor educational outcomes ([EPL, 2019](#)).

Conclusion

Women's only mental health services and creche provision are urgently needed in Brighton & Hove to support the many women in our city who are facing complex mental health challenges. Safe, women-only environments are crucial to engaging women who've experienced trauma and abuse with mental health support services, so they can take positive steps to improve their wellbeing, before they reach crisis point.

Any cuts to BWC's Mental Health Support services at this time would have a devastating impact on over 200 women, and their families, in the city, resulting in



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those women who are most in need of support, falling through the gaps. With the possibility of funding cuts this year, we urge you to consider the knock-on effect on the hundreds of women we support.

Without BWC, many would have nowhere else to turn for support.