



# Executive Summary - Evaluation Report

Women's Commissioning Support Unit  
(WCSU) Three Year Pilot Programme

'Building capacity, developing partnerships'



## Acknowledgements

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## About the Women's Resource Centre

The Women's Resource Centre (WRC) is a charity which supports women's organisations to be more effective and sustainable. We provide training, information, resources and one-to-one support on a range of organisational development issues. We also lobby decision makers on behalf of the women's not-for-profit sector for improved representation and funding.

Our members work in a wide range of fields including health, violence against women, employment, education, rights and equality, the criminal justice system and the environment. They deliver services to and campaign on behalf of some of the most marginalised communities of women. There are over ten thousand people working or volunteering for our members who support almost half a million individuals each year.

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## 1. About This Report

This is an executive summary of independent evaluation report into Women's Commissioning Support Unit (WCSU) pilot programme, commissioned by Women's Resource Centre (WRC); the leading national umbrella body for women's charities.<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed report, in terms of background, methodology, results and discussion, see WCSU Final Evaluation Report (December 2018).

### 1.1. Women's Commissioning Support Unit (WCSU)

WCSU was a three-year Pilot Programme (November 2015 – October 2018), implemented and delivered by WRC, in four regional areas including: North East, Greater Manchester, Cambridge and Peterborough, and West Midlands. The WCSU pilot was underpinned by four main outcomes:

1. 60 women's organisations will have the capacity to engage in innovative forms of service delivery, able to bid for public sector contracts as part of consortium
2. By the end of the pilot programme commissioners identify and assess needs of women and girls, developing policy direction and selecting collaboration and consortium as appropriate delivery mechanisms to achieve the best outcomes for women and families
3. Brokered contracts to the value of £2,000,000
4. WRC to achieve ISO 9001 certification

Each of the four areas had a dedicated facilitator to coordinate and lead WCSU capacity building support. This entailed holding the overall picture for the region, supporting the establishment of women's partnerships, and developing commissioner relationships.

Moreover, a team of trainers delivered specialist skills training as required. The range of workshops included: regional strategy (e.g. feminist economy, improving the sector regionally); organisational focus (governance, legal structures, social

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1. Women's Resource Centre (WRC) was founded in 1984 (registered as a charity in 1998) and has since established itself as the leading national umbrella body for women's charities. WRC supports network members to be more effective and sustainable, via the provision of training, information, resources and one-to-one support. Members of WRC provide essential services to women and children and work in multidisciplinary fields including: violence against women and girls (VAWG), employment, education, rights and equality, criminal justice system, and the environment. Furthermore, WRC lobby decision makers on behalf of the women's sector for improved representation and funding.

values and mission); and skills training (finance, gender analysis, bid writing, presentation).

## 1.2. Methodology

The methodological framework for this evaluation was a participatory approach, blended with aspects of feminist epistemology. According to feminist epistemology, the key to transformative change is the empowerment of women through consciousness raising and situating women's biographies and narratives within their context (1).

Data were gathered for this evaluation utilising semi-structured interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders including: WCSU staff and associates, CEOs from women's organisations, and commissioning professionals. Moreover, throughout the lifetime of the WCSU Pilot Programme, staff and associates have built a bank of secondary data and resources, which have provided a context to the evaluation.

## 1.3. Evaluation Aims

- Identify key learning points including: regional differences, partnership structures, intersectionality, and effectiveness of 'led by and for' women specialist services
- Investigate the impact of commissioning on women's sector, including: commissioners' understanding of the women's sector, and what enables commissioners to understand the benefits of women-focused partnerships
- Develop alternative commissioning approaches for women's partnerships including: make recommendations on how women's organisations can best establish and sustain specialist services consortia, and ways in which local commissioners can minimise gender inequality/discrimination

## 2. Evaluation Results

This section provides a summary of the key findings from the evaluation into the WCSU Pilot Programme, in terms of: the successes, challenges and learning; five regional case studies into women-focused partnerships developed and supported by WCSU; and commissioning.

## 2.1. Key Successes of the WCSU Pilot

From November 2015 – October 2018 WCSU has:

- resolved long-term conflict and built trust between local women's organisations, creating spaces where local women's organisations were able to develop a shared purpose and voice
- increased knowledge, skills and capacity amongst women's organisations in key areas essential for consortium participation, i.e. finance, due diligence, gendered approaches, social value and commissioning:
  - 73% of participants reported better understanding of social value and its relevance to public sector commissioning
  - 69% of participants reported improved ability to integrate gender in all aspects of project design and delivery
- built trust between local women's organisations; creating spaces where local women's organisations could develop a shared purpose and stronger local feminist voices:
  - 176 organisations reported that developing partnership/consortia is important for the long-term sustainability to deliver services
- engaged and worked with 251 women's organisations, and facilitated three women's partnerships to be contract ready
- identified small 'led-by-and-for' women's organisations undertaking specialist work in communities, empowered them to gain essential knowledge and skills to increase their organisations' efficacy and capacity
- facilitated 98 workshops and training events with women's organisations
- provided 101 coaching and support (one-to-one) sessions for women's organisations
- held and/or co-organised 28 commissioner networking events
  - 83% of commissioners report understanding the need for local partnerships as means to deliver effective outcomes for women and girls
  - 77% of commissioners report being effective in communicating their commissioning opportunities with the women's sector
  - 60% of commissioners understand the need for a gendered analysis in the commissioning process

- facilitated 3 (of 4) women’s partnerships to be contract ready, brokering contracts/funds to the value of £1,453,076 for 4 consortia
- WRC has successfully completed ISO Certification are registered ISO Certificate Holders.<sup>2</sup>

## 2.2. WCSU Pilot Key Challenges

Despite the successes, there were several challenges encountered during the WCSU Pilot including:

- intensive support was required in some areas of this work, which resulted in challenges for WCSU staff and associates, and the overall project
- a lack of time and capacity for women’s organisations to commit to participation in partnerships, with many organisations already stretched, in terms of capacity and cuts to funding/staffing
- entrenched conflicts between some women’s organisations within local areas
- power imbalances between larger and smaller women’s organisations, and the silencing and exclusion of small, and specifically Black<sup>3</sup> and minoritised<sup>4</sup>, women’s organisations
- small and specialist women’s organisations required intensive one-to-one development
- deep and prolonged cuts to public spending, and continuing political uncertainty and change; alongside increasing demand for services from women’s organisations
- ongoing organisational and staff restructuring and cuts within statutory and public-sector bodies and organisations, resulting in the loss of key relationships

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2. ISO 9001 is an internationally recognised quality management systems standard, designed to help organisations ensure that they meet the needs of customers and other stakeholders while meeting statutory and regulatory requirements related to a product or service.

3. ‘Black’ is used in the socio-political context to unite non-white communities that experience racism. The term is not attributed to race or colour of people.

4. ‘Minoritised’ refers to communities that endure mistreatment and face prejudices that are enforced upon them because of situations outside of their control.

- lack of support and/or knowledge of gender approaches to service provision within the statutory sector, alongside the increasing implementation of gender-neutral approaches to all women specialist service provision

## 2.3. Commissioning and the Women's Sector

An overview of the findings from interviews with commissioning professionals, in terms of challenges for commissioners, and working with the voluntary and women's sectors, is provided in the sections below.

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### 2.3.1. Challenges for Professionals Working in Commissioning Environments

- prolonged period of economic and political uncertainty, and austerity, resulting in diminished budgets for commissioning areas
- managing reduced budgets in line with increasing competition for funding and increasing demand for frontline services is increasingly challenging for commissioners
- balancing the distribution of a reduced budget, whilst considering the capability of organisations to continue to provide front-line services with less funding, a key challenge for commissioners
- short-term funding has negative impacts on the commissioning of services, the sustainability of commissioned services, and the voluntary and women's sector, especially for front line services, such as refuges, DV/SV and victim services
- lack of funding has adversely impacted on commissioners' ability to fund single sex services and influenced the decision for many local authorities and commissioners adopting a gender-neutral approach
- devolution of budgets to local commissioners, led to challenges in commissioning in terms of managing large budgets and increased responsibility, and a prolonged period of instability for commissioners, services providers and the sector overall
- increasing demand for services and a rapidly increasing field of issues in recent years, creating challenges in assessing local need and identifying the best services to meet these needs
- lack of joined-up working and commissioning between various local commissioning areas, resulting in duplication of spending and ineffective use of reduced budgets and funding

- unrealistic expectations of commissioners to resolve all the problems and challenges in the voluntary sector
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### **2.3.2. Working with voluntary/women's sector organisations**

- relationships between commissioners and local service providers are mutually beneficial, and confer advantages for service-users
  - working together with service-providers is more efficient, in terms of reduced bureaucracy and ensuring that services are provided by local specialists and experts
  - local specialist organisations have a better knowledge of the local area and local need, than most larger organisations
  - voluntary sector organisations bring more expertise than larger generic organisations
  - increased trust and confidence in voluntary sector organisations
  - voluntary sector organisations galvanise community support in a way that private sector organisations are unable to
  - organisations within the voluntary sector bring more social value than organisations within the private sector
  - commissioning of single-sex services is important, particularly for female victims of domestic abuse and violence, and children, and for Black and minoritised women
  - increased likelihood of contractual breaches with smaller and voluntary sector organisations
  - expectations from smaller and voluntary sector organisations to meet overheads and staff costs
- 

### **2.3.3. How can the voluntary and women's sector better influence commissioners?**

- openness and honesty from service providers were key factors in the development of successful relationships with commissioners
  - engaging with commissioners and commissioning bodies via strategic groups and local authority meetings
  - rigorous monitoring and evidencing of outcomes in terms of the services being delivered
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- providing hard evidence of both local need and how services can meet local needs was considered essential
- services need make changes in the way they deliver services to reduce costs and manage the expectations of service-users in the context of what can be provided within diminished budgets
- partnerships between organisations in the voluntary/women's sector were advocated by commissioning professionals. The benefits of partnerships in the voluntary sector were considered to be of significant social value

## 2.4. Regional Case Studies

WCSU has supported a total of five women's partnerships within four regional areas including the North East, Greater Manchester, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, and West Midlands including:

1. Women First Partnership – North East
2. Greater Manchester Freedom from Abuse Partnership
3. Mama Health and Poverty Partnership – Greater Manchester
4. Cambridge and Peterborough Women's Consortium
5. Women's Justice Partnership – West Midlands

A summary of the findings from case studies into the five women-focused partnership, in terms of successes, challenges and learning, is provided in the sections below. (For more detailed case studies, with regional demographics, see WCSU Final Evaluation and Interim Evaluation Reports)

## 2.5. North East: Women First Partnership

Women First are a partnership of 'led by and for' women's organisations providing holistic and integrated counselling and listening services that help women to care for their families, stay in work and return to work after sickness. Organisations within the partnership take a targeted approach to tackling gender inequality, ensuring that women's political, social, economic, cultural, familial position is strengthened.

### 2.5.1. The key successes of the Women First Partnership include:

- Full application submitted for £760,000 to address lone parents and those with caring responsibilities, people from Black and minoritised communities, those experiencing domestic violence, and members of workless households. Submitted in response to the European Structural and

Investment Funds Growth Programme call for Specialist support for those furthest away from the labour market

- local women's organisations coming together, sharing and developing a stronger collective feminist voice
- increasing essential knowledge and expertise amongst local women's organisations via the provision of training, support and guidance from WCSU

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### 2.5.2. The primary challenges in the development of Women First include

- inconsistent knowledge of the women's sector and application of gender-based approaches in commissioning and the public/statutory sector
- cuts to public budgets and funding for specialist services, and competitive commissioning processes that disadvantage smaller/specialist organisations
- internal challenges, including a lack of time and capacity, resulting in slow development of a formal partnership

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### 2.5.3. The learning and priorities moving forward for the partnership

- importance of an independent regional facilitator to maintain momentum and motivation to move the partnership forward towards sustainability
- sustain the partnership through successful funding for delivery of joint services and consider alternative funding sources, i.e. enterprise models and delivery of specialist training
- continue collaborating with, sharing and supporting local women's organisations, and upskilling smaller organisations and continue to provide evidence for the need for women-only services

## 2.6. Greater Manchester: Freedom from Abuse Partnership

Greater Manchester Freedom from Abuse Partnership (GMFFA) consists of organisations working with women, girls, families and communities to end all forms of DV/SV and supporting women's organisations across Greater Manchester. Organisations provide a comprehensive, holistic and diverse range of proactive and preventative services to support and empower women and girls, families and communities to end all forms of DV and SV.

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### 2.6.1. The key successes of the Freedom from Abuse Partnership include

- £15,000 from Women's Foundation for dedicated coordinator to work with the Partnership and undertake outreach
- bringing local women's organisations together in partnership and developing a collective voice
- increasing essential knowledge and expertise amongst local women's organisations, via the provision of training, support and guidance from WCSU
- coming together in women's partnership increased ability influence and engage with commissioners

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### 2.6.2. The primary challenges in the development of Freedom from Abuse Partnership include

- internal conflicts between organisations, i.e. between larger and smaller organisations, in terms of conflicts in policies and priorities, and power struggles, resulted in Black and minoritised women's organisation exiting the partnership
- internal conflicts between WCSU's provision and what some partners perceived the consortium required, resulting in WCSU no longer working with GMFFA
- external challenges inconsistent knowledge of the women's sector and application of gender-based approaches in commissioning and the public/statutory sector

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### 2.6.3. The learning and priorities moving forward for the partnership

- opinions moving forward within the partnership were spilt with some organisations confident in moving forward and others feeling the partnership lacked momentum, motivation and direction
- some partners were confident they had the skills and knowledge to successfully gain funding to deliver joint service provision, but lacked the capacity to carry out the processes and administration
- other partners considered that a back to basics approach was required to identify short, medium- and long-term goals, in addition to governance and direction for an independent party such as WCSU

## 2.7. Greater Manchester: Mama Health and Poverty Partnership

Organisations within the Mama Health and Poverty Partnership are cultural specialist service providers located within Greater Manchester, supporting victims of intimate partner violence, survivors of FGM, women who have fled war-torn countries, and women refugees/asylum seekers. The partnership brings together specialist services for Black and African women and girls, who are at times hidden and isolated, often suffering lack of finances and living with health care needs, to eradicate health inequalities and poverty faced by Black and African women.

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### 2.7.1. The key successes of the Mama Health and Poverty Partnership include

- bringing together a group of highly specialist, small, local women's organisations 'led by and for' Black African and Caribbean women
- sharing and developing a stronger collective voice and highlighting the issues faced by women within Black African and Caribbean communities, such as FGM, DV/SV, mental health stigma
- increasing essential knowledge and expertise via the provision of training, support and guidance from WCSU, and increasing knowledge of gendered issues such as DV/SV and women's roles in society
- collating local data to better understand the local issues affecting women, identify need and use as evidence to support funding applications and influence commissioners

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### 2.7.2. The primary challenges in the development of Mama Health and Poverty Partnership include

- lack of knowledge of Black and minoritised women's issues and specialised women's services within the local commissioning environment in Greater Manchester
- commissioning processes act in favour of larger, national and generic organisations and charities, and disadvantage smaller and specialist local organisations
- cuts in funding to gender specific services nationally and locally, i.e. significant lack of specialist services for victims of FGM outside secondary care services
- lack of knowledge of commissioning processes and commissioners

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### 2.7.3. The learning and priorities moving forward for the Mama Health and Poverty partnership

- importance of an independent regional facilitator to maintain momentum and motivation to move the partnership forward towards sustainability
- continue to research at grassroots level to identify issues and needs for Black and minoritised women locally
- gather and utilise this local evidence to influence commissioners and raise awareness of local led by and for Black and minoritised women's organisations
- support other local women's organisations and building wider, stronger and sustainable networks

## 2.8. Cambridge and Peterborough Women's Consortium

Cambridge and Peterborough Women's Consortium (CPWC) are a collaboration of women-led, and local, community-based charities, working with victim-survivors of SV/DV, young women who are NEET, Gypsy/Roma/Traveller women, parents misusing alcohol and young parents, women offenders, and women and girls with poor mental health and low levels of numeracy and literacy.

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### 2.8.1. The key successes of the Cambridge and Peterborough Women's Consortium include

- successfully gaining £15,000 from Lloyds Foundation and Awards for All for short-term consortium development worker input
- bringing together local women's organisations and developing a collective feminist voice, with supporting and learning from each other - sharing expertise and resources, and referrals between organisations
- providing organisations with a better knowledge to support women from different local populations and communities
- increasing knowledge and skills through support and guidance in developing a consortium and understanding commissioning processes, and increased ability to influence commissioners as a collective and increased visibility locally

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### **2.8.2. The primary challenges in the development of Cambridge and Peterborough Women’s Consortium include**

- difficult commissioning environment, due to ongoing austerity, i.e. cuts LA and public sector budgets
- devolution of funding to local authorities and adverse effects on local women’s organisations
- Cambridgeshire Local Authority applied a gender-neutral approach to domestic violence

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### **2.8.3. The learning and priorities moving forward for the Cambridge and Peterborough Women’s Consortium partnership include**

- funding applications for delivery of joint services and gaining longer term funding is a key priority for the consortium
- the consortium is considering alternative funding models such as enterprise models and delivery of training
- in the longer-term, partners discussed the potential of a local hubs to support service users and support local women’s organisations to mobilise and create stronger local voices
- the role of an independent facilitator was fundamental in moving forward with the consortium – CPWC were successful in gaining funding for a short-term development worker

## **2.9. West Midlands: Women’s Justice Partnership**

Women’s Justice Partnership is a collaboration of women’s organisations across the West Midlands, supporting women affected by the criminal justice system, via offenders’ provision, DV/SV services, education and employment, and outreach to sex workers. Not all organisations provide services exclusively to women, and some offer generic services with specific arms that work with women and families. Organisations work to develop women’s strengths, build resilience and empower them to take better control of their lives.

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### **2.9.1. The key successes of the Women’s Justice Partnership include**

- successfully gained £663,076 from the VAWG Transformation Fund for ASSIST (Assessment, Support, Signposting, Intervention, Safeguarding & Trauma), which addresses violence against women and girls

- coming together with purpose - support provide by WCSU was fundamental in facilitating a more organised and formal partnership, creating partnership agreements and development goals
- increasing knowledge and skills through joint learning provided through WCSU. Acquiring this knowledge enabled the partnership to be more confident when presenting gender specific services to commissioners

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### **2.9.2. The primary challenges in the development of Women's Justice Partnership include**

- conflict of interests between organisations that were solely led by and for women and those who were mixed organisations with a women-only arm
- challenges in local commissioning associated with cuts to public spending budgets and services, and financial difficulties within local authorities. Adverse impacts of competitive tendering processes and the drive towards single providers of local services

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### **2.9.3. The learning and priorities moving forward for the partnership**

- partnership needed to increase the number of led by and for women's organisations within the partnership
- continue working as a collaboration in delivering local women's services and raising awareness of the local women's sector
- deliver local events to formally establish partnership and influence local commissioners

## 3. Discussion

### 3.1. Working Towards a Model for Effective Women-Focused Consortia

Using the evidence gathered for this evaluation, a model has been developed to illustrate the conditions conducive to developing and sustaining effective women-focused partnerships, consisting of three domains including: (See Figure 1)

1. Women's Organisations
2. Regional WRC Hubs
3. Conducive Commissioning Environments

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#### 3.1.1. Women's Organisations

Findings from this evaluation and previous research have highlighted that the women's and voluntary sectors have a key role in coming together to provide a stronger shared voice to engage with commissioners (19). Local women's sectors that collaborate have a more formidable feminist voice, which demands recognition of gender inequalities and differences and the need for women-only space. Preferably, women's organisations within partnerships should be anti-discriminatory and 'led-by-and-for' women. The inclusion of small organisations is crucial, especially those 'led-by-and-for' Black and minoritised and other equality groups of women.

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#### 3.1.2. Regional WRC Hubs

Findings from this evaluation support the development of regional WRC hubs, delivering a tailored package of support, which assesses and responds to capacity building requirements of organisations, and meets the needs of local women's organisations to develop and sustain women-focused partnerships. These hubs would also work to increase local knowledge of commissioning frameworks and processes and foster stronger regional voices for the women's sector that act as vehicles for engaging with and influencing commissioners. In addition, hubs may provide development to women's organisations in terms of increasing political

astuteness, via activities that encourage knowledge sharing and critical debate around public policy, at local, national and international<sup>5</sup> levels.

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### **3.1.3. Conducive Commissioning Environment**

The findings from this evaluation and previous research has shown that current commissioning processes disadvantage women’s organisations, especially smaller, specialist organisations, through short-term contracts, poor commissioning practices, and a lack of ‘gendered’ understanding on tackling voice and abuse (2). A report by the House of Lords Select Committee on Charities has called for commissioners in the public sector to increase their regard for the sustainability of organisations, by meeting realistic and justifiable core costs within contracts, providing longer-term contracts, and offering grant programmes to charities where possible.(3) An embedded gender analysis approach within commissioning processes and frameworks, which recognises the essential need for women-only services in local communities, is advocated.

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### **3.1.4. Moving Forward with a Model for Developing and Sustaining Women-Focused Consortia**

The evidence-based model illustrated in this report highlights the co-existing and overlapping conditions conducive to developing and sustaining effective women-focused consortia. The evidence provided in this model advocates an innovative approach to sustain the important and highly specialised work women’s organisations undertake in their communities, during a period of economic and political instability, and increasing and changing demand for services. The collaboration of women’s organisations locally provides a formidable vehicle for influencing commissioners, local authorities and funders, tackling gender and race inequalities, and protecting sex-based rights to women-only space and provision. Moreover, women-focused consortia enable women’s organisations to increase their capacity and sustainability. In supporting women-focused consortia and a stronger women’s sector, commissioners and funders have a responsibility in fostering environments that are supportive to the sustainability of women’s sector, in recognition of their important contribution to health and wellbeing in communities.

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5. International research and policy, e.g. Convention of on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD)

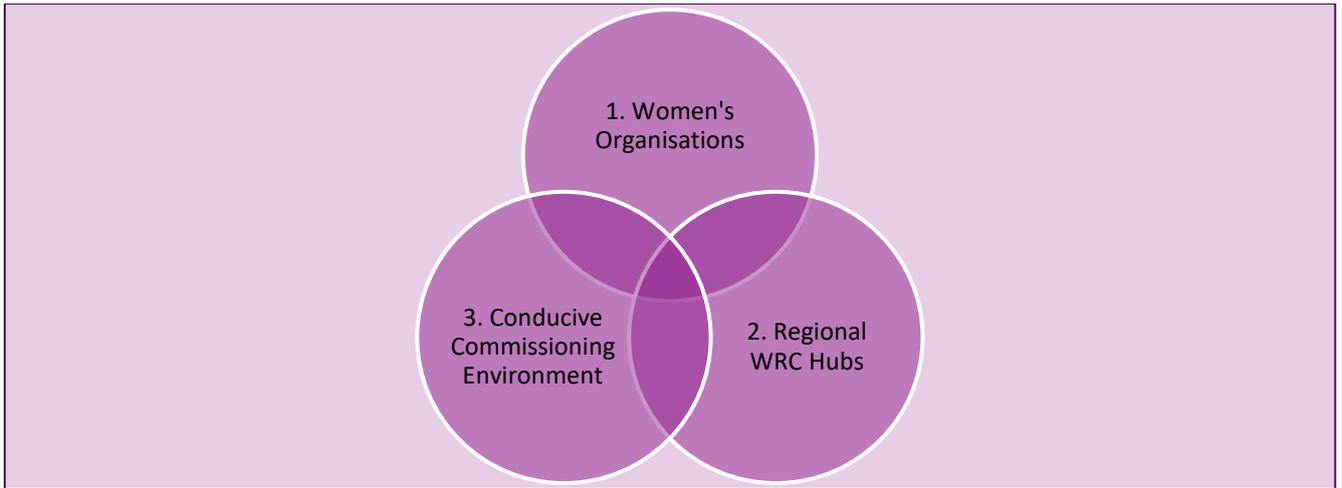


Figure 1: Illustrating a model for effective women-focused consortia

## 3.2. Recommendations

### 3.2.1. Regional hubs

To retain and continue to develop the body of knowledge gained from the WCSU pilot, WRC regional hubs are suggested:

- to continue the development and sustainability of women’s partnerships and provide support to apply for joint funding
- to continue to identify and work with smaller women’s organisations, particularly those that are anti-discriminatory and ‘led-by-and-for’ equality groups
- to provide support and knowledge around local commissioners and commissioning frameworks and processes, and other public policy, demographic processes and service delivery
- to enable women’s organisations to work more effectively with different stakeholders, i.e. building interpersonal skills, and alignment and alliances, and engaging with media
- to explore alternative models of funding to ensure sustainability within the current economic climate
- to develop a collective regional feminist voice to engage with and influence commissioners and strengthen the voice of the women’s sector
- to undertake and facilitate scoping and mapping research to identify gaps in local service provision

- to raise awareness of the social value of specialist anti-discriminatory and 'led-by-and-for' organisations in meeting the needs of local women and their families
- to provide development to women's organisations in terms of increasing political astuteness, via activities that encourage knowledge sharing and critical debate around public policy, at local, national and international levels

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### 3.2.2. Recommendations for commissioning professionals

It is also recommended that commissioners, commissioning bodies and funders of services:

- develop stronger partnerships with women's organisations, especially those that are anti-discriminatory and 'led-by-and-for' minority and marginalised groups
- embed a gender analysis approach to commissioning of services, that recognises the essential need for women-only services in local communities
- ensure commissioning processes and frameworks recognise the value smaller and specialist organisations bring to communities
- increase regard for the sustainability of organisations, by meeting realistic and justifiable core costs, providing longer-term contracts, and offering grant programmes
- support women's organisations, especially smaller and specialist organisations, to build their capacity, diversify their income and better evidence their value and impact

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