



# Putting Women on the Agenda

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**A Lived Experience  
Guide for Drug and  
Alcohol Services and  
System Leaders in  
Brighton and Hove**

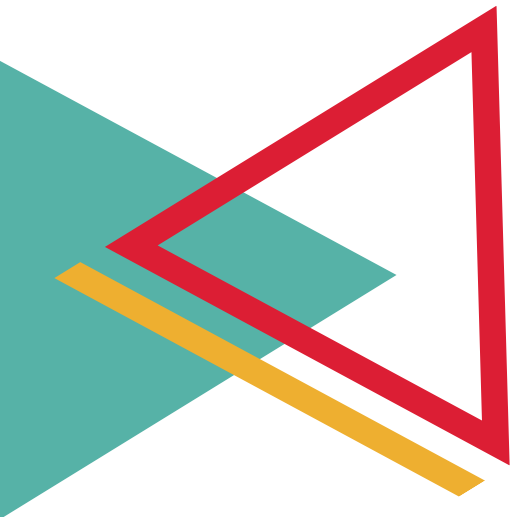


BRIGHTON & HOVE  
**COMMON  
AMBITION**

Brighton and Hove Combatting Drugs  
Partnership Lived Experience Programme -  
The Women's Group



This guidance was co-produced by women who have been affected by substances and are in recovery.



Women who have accessed services in Brighton and Hove.

Women who want to work collaboratively to make services in the city more accessible to the women who need them.

By women we mean anyone who self-identifies as a woman.



The first edition was published in November 2024. This is the second edition, published in March 2025.

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# Overview

## Common Ambition and the Combatting Drugs Partnership

In June 2024, Common Ambition (trauma-informed co-production specialists) joined forces with the Combatting Drugs Partnership (a system wide partnership led by Brighton and Hove City Council Public Health Department) to implement a lived experience programme to support the partnership.

## Women's design sprint

As part of the lived experience programme a six-week design sprint\* for women in recovery was carried out to co-produce\*\* system and service improvement. Six women in recovery and staff members from Common Ambition worked together to map the drug and alcohol system in Brighton and Hove, identify key challenges, ideate solutions and improvements and develop prototypes for the system to adopt.

## This guide

This document is one of the outputs from the women's design sprint. It includes the mapping, challenges and ideation work the group carried out, alongside co-produced guidance and tools for commissioners and services to use to improve services, increase engagement and ultimately improve outcomes for women who are affected by substances.

## Women's Group

The success of the initial women's design sprint enabled the group of women (and several new members) to continue their work in 2025. From January 2025 the group have been meeting fortnightly. During this time they have worked on a number of issues laid out in this guide and have made some edits to the text based on this work.

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\*A design sprint is a set of weekly two-hour workshops dedicated to designing improvements to an identified challenge area within the system.

\*\* Common Ambition defines co-production as involving people who use services or who have lived experience in improving services and system change. It is not just about gaining insight from experience, but people with experience leading design, development, implementation and evaluation of interventions. For Common Ambition, safety, trauma-informed working, accessibility, balancing power dynamics and enabling equal voice are all key components to co-production.

# System map

During the first session of the women's design sprint, the drug and alcohol system and other important services for women affected by substances in Brighton and Hove were mapped. This was key to understanding the system and identifying challenges, barriers and gaps within it.

This map may be useful for your service. For example, it can be used as an onboarding tool for new members of staff or be put on staff notice boards so staff are able to signpost women within your service.

System map for women's spaces in Brighton and Hove



# Challenges

In the second week of the women's design sprint, the challenges, barriers and gaps experienced or witnessed within the drug and alcohol system were identified.

## Women may not realise they face challenges with substances

- Being unaware that they have a problem with substances

## Barriers to accessing support

- Opening hours are not always accessible
- Lack of knowledge of what is included in the service provision
- Not knowing what services are out there
- Long waiting lists
- Lack of safeguarding of women
- Lack of support in emergency accommodation

## Discomfort around men

- General discomfort around men
- Fear of predatory behaviour
- Being taken advantage of
- Women may fear seeing their abuser

## Male dominated groups

- Groups are often male dominated
- There is not accessible information about women's fellowship options
- Lack of women's groups

## Bad first impression of services

- Services do not look safe and friendly on first impression
- Not enough women's drop in to view services
- Not enough women in the service or working in the service on first impression

## Facing stigma & judgement

- Stigma and being judged
- Feeling guilt or shame
- Not knowing who to trust and where to go

## Concerns for mothers & caregivers

- Sometimes the social worker is a man
- Social services not linked with services
- Lack of childcare options
- Risk of losing contact with children
- Fear of school involvement
- Fear of social services
- Women may be caregivers for wider family
- Not all people working in social services have the correct information or training
- Mothers do not always know their rights
- Not enough short support programmes, so mothers are away from children too long
- Not enough information about how the system works when you have children
- Not enough child friendly services

## Issues in residential rehab

- Male workers uninformed about women's issues
- They are male dominated spaces
- Feeling isolated - no other women
- No sanitary products
- Sexist language 'banter'
- No privacy - sharing bathrooms
- No women's groups in residential rehabs

## Accommodation

- Not enough aftercare for women particularly around accommodation (especially in case of unplanned exits), where can women go that is safe?
- Having to give up secure tenancies to go into treatment, fear of what will happen

## Pharmacies and medication

- Pharmacies can be very male dominated, you can feel anxious about regularly picking up a script. There may be men who you know here too
- It is difficult to get to a pharmacy regularly if you have children
- Buprenorphine as a treatment for opioid dependence works really well for women. You do not need to go to pharmacies, however there are limited opportunities in Brighton and Hove

# Prioritising the challenges

All of the challenges are very important, but with only six weeks (initially) to design tangible change, they needed to be prioritised. After much discussion and clustering of challenges, the following key challenges were identified:

## Male dominated spaces

This includes male dominated groups, feeling unsafe around men, uninformed male workers, issues in residential rehab and bad first impressions of services.

## Barriers to accessing support

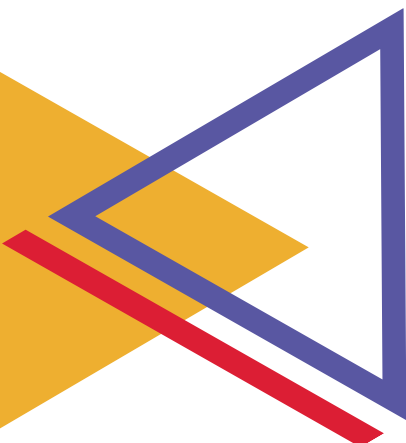
Most importantly, not knowing what services are available and how to access them, services not communicating well enough with each other and groups or workshops clashing.

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## A note:

### 'Concerns for mothers and caregivers' challenge area

The challenge area 'concerns for mothers and caregivers' was flagged by the group as extremely important. However, within the initial six week design sprint the group had together it was not enough time to dedicate to this. This is an area that needs work to improve pathways and communication to reduce judgement and anxiety. A dedicated longer design sprint bringing together mothers and caregivers with services and social services to generate improvements is strongly recommended.



# Ideas for change & improvement

Ideation sessions to generate change and improvements in the key challenge areas were carried out in week three. Please take a look through these ideas and see what your service/organisation/system can adopt.

## Key challenge area 1 - Male dominated spaces (rehab, groups, services)

### Make rehabs more inviting

- A mini makeover of residential rehab
- Share list of residential rehab challenges with local rehabs
- Make one bathroom/toilet women only
- A 'what to expect' meeting before visiting places so people aren't put off by first impressions
- Checklist for residential rehab to make sure space is women friendly
- Female workers or volunteers always there as the 'first face'
- Create a pack for rehabs, list of what women need and want

### Keep women on the agenda

- Bring all the services together for updates on what services/groups are available for women and things that have worked in their own services OR if there are already system meetings happening then make it a recurring agenda item

### Raise awareness of the challenges

- Create and share our set of challenges women face with services and commissioners

### A set of standards

- Create a set of standards for male workers and residents
- Visible agreements or standards in all shared spaces to help women feel safe

### Training

- Training for male workers that will be working with women
- Carry out group/workshops for men using services with an aim to educate

### New Service Ideas

The following ideas are for additional service provision.

### Residential rehab

- If local rehabs don't have enough women for a group - create one group for all services
- Ensure there is a time for women to view rehabs and it is run by a woman
- Allow women to do women's groups as an option during group time in rehab

### Workers

- Assign female workers only to women
- Bring an Oasis worker into Richmond house

### Groups

- Campaign for women's groups at mixed gender services

## Key challenge area 2 - Barriers to accessing support

### Ideas for all services

- Change hours/increase hours
- All services to check timetabling - no overlapping groups
- Cover travel costs
- Ask women using the service if there's anything they need. Check in - are they comfortable?

### Maps and service information

- Maps of all services on services' websites, not just the ones they offer
- Printed maps with contact details and service offer in public spaces
- Poster of services available in public spaces and service receptions
- All support services having up to date knowledge of the whole system, less gaps in connection and communication
- Create a journey map, so people know where to go and what to expect

### GPs

- Guidance for GPs who don't know where to signpost or refer women to

### Training

- Training around stigma and its impact
- Mandatory training on women's issues
- Appropriately trained staff in all support services to provide non-judgemental guidance

### New service ideas

- An online version of a services map with links to the services
- 24 hour line for women in Brighton and Hove
- Online meetings for women
- A general drop in for women who have questions/concerns and for signposting to support services

The ideas were prioritised and the following two ideas were taken forward:

#### Idea 1: The Map

Campaign for an online map of the services and co-produce a poster to signpost women who may be affected by substances.

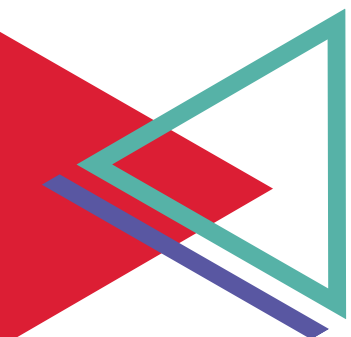
#### Idea 2: Putting Women on the Agenda

A lived experience guidance, including all of identified challenges and ideas for change and a set of co-produced tools for services and commissioners. To be launched at a lived experience led event.

# Key ideas for services and systems to adopt

All of the ideas will improve experiences for women accessing drug and alcohol services. However, the key ideas for change that can and should be adopted by services and system leaders are outlined below.

1. Ask women what they want and need!
2. If there are not enough women in your service to create a women's group, collaborate with other services to create joint groups
3. In all system and service meetings ensure an agenda item for women
4. Ensure all staff are trained in trauma-informed care
5. Ensure all staff have knowledge on housing, social services and other services within the system
6. For system leaders the group found the following guide <https://justiceinnovation.org/publications/drug-and-alcohol-treatment-services-women-guide-commissioning>.



# Tools for your service

The following pages contain co-produced tools for services, please adopt them in your service.

## 1. Feedback Forms

One of the most important things you can do to improve services for women is ask them what they want and need. Below are two feedback forms for services.

### **Feedback Form 1: Developed by CGL's Jo Hart (in consultation with the women's group), a feedback form for women in residential rehab**

We are interested to hear from female service users about accessing rehab, and how we can improve the numbers of women accessing and completing rehab.

1. Do you identify as female YES/NO
2. Has your Oasis/CGL worker spoken to you about rehab options either recently, or in the past? YES/NO/NOT SURE
3. Do you know what options there are and how you can be referred? YES/NO
4. Have you been to rehab before? YES/NO
5. If yes, was this local rehab (BHT/STF) or out of the area?
6. Do you have caring responsibilities ( children or an adult)? YES/NO
7. Are there any barriers to women accessing rehab? I.e. not wanting a mixed gender environment. Please give examples:  
.....  
.....
8. What do you think would make it easier for female service users to access rehab? Please make as many suggestions as you can think of!  
.....  
.....
- 9a. How long do you think you need to be in rehab for?.....
- 9b. Would a shorter term treatment be suitable for you? YES/NO

## Feedback Form 2: Survey for all women accessing or wanting to access drug and alcohol services - Co-produced during the women's design sprint



1. Do you identify as female Yes/NO

### Finding help

2. Where would you go to find information about support for women?

.....

3. If you are already accessing support, where did you find out about it?

.....

4. What barriers do you face accessing support?

.....

.....

.....

5. Are you aware of other drug and alcohol services for women? YES/NO

If yes, what other services do you use? .....

### Your support

6. What sort of support do you prefer?

Women's group

Women's drop in

Women's rehab

Women's online group

Women's peer support (peer support means someone who has a similar experience, who is in recovery, being able to provide support)

Other, please state .....

7. What do you need to feel safe when accessing drug and alcohol services?

.....

.....

8. If drug and alcohol services are not just for women (i.e. men access the service at the same time as women), would that prevent you from going? YES/NO

### Improvements

9. What would you like to see improved for women accessing drug and alcohol services? (For example, more women's spaces, a buddy system, a women's drop in)

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.....

.....

10. Are there any women's services you would like to see that are not currently available to you?

.....

.....

### For mothers and caregivers

11. If required, do you feel confident navigating interactions with social services? YES/NO

If yes, what helped?

.....

.....

If no, how could this be improved?

.....

.....

# 2. Ideas that can be easily adopted by services

## Female workers

- Make sure there is an option for all women to have a female Key Worker
- When women call for support a female worker is offered within the day
- Ensure female staff at front desk/reception

## Safe spaces for women

- Meet women in their safe space
- Have a drop in for women, ensure they are regular and consistent
- Ensure that your service will allow women to bring someone with them for support
- Carry out a role play session, where you run through the first impression a woman might have of your service
- Have a supply of sanitary products

## Peer support

- Have female peer workers to meet with women when they access your service
- Offer linking up opportunities with other women who use your services, creating a buddy scheme

## Keep putting women on the agenda

- Have an agenda item for women on all of your team meetings

## Early intervention

- Have relapse prevention guidelines and support available for women
- Focus on prevention, have a space for women who have questions, or just want to cut down, so that behaviours can change before it gets to crisis point

## Support for mothers & caregivers

- Have a space that is child friendly
- Provide information about services early on when a mother/caregiver accesses your service. Ensure you let them know that it is not inevitable that children will get taken away

## Accessible information

- Have a list of fellowships for women and those that are child friendly
- Have posters up in your service about what you offer for women
- Have information about other services in shared spaces
- Send text updates if you start new groups or programmes
- Share your service updates with other services
- Ensure clear directions to your service, including a map on your website

## Collaborate

- Link up and collaborate with other drug and alcohol services as much as you can
- Work together to avoid timetable clashes with other services
- Create a wider women's peer support team, so that there is a peer for women who are the only women in a service

## Education

- Educate groups of men and groups of women in your service about appropriate behaviours towards each other

# 3. Female friendly checklist

The following checklist has been co-produced for services to support them to be safe and accessible for women

## Sexist language, behaviour, 'banter'

- We take inappropriate language, 'banter' and sexist behaviour seriously
- We speak to all men working in and accessing the service to ensure respectful and safe language and behaviour around women
- If there is sexist language, 'banter' or disrespectful behaviour towards women we issue warnings
- We proactively monitor language and behaviour towards women
- Every woman in our service knows what to do if they witness or experience inappropriate behaviour

## Spaces that women access

- We have separate toilets for women
- There are sanitary products available for all women
- There is a well stocked supply of sanitary products in the toilets
- Our service is a mixed gender service and there is a separate entrance for women
- There is a dedicated women's space, for example, lounge or waiting room, in our service
- There are groups for women in our service
- We have drop ins specifically for women to access or view our services that are led by female staff members
- It is possible for all women to request a female key worker



## Childcare

- We ensure there are groups that work around school times for parents
- We can provide childcare
- We have groups that are child friendly

## Shorter treatment options

- We would consider offering a shorter programme for women

## Staff training and knowledge

- All staff have an understanding of social services' processes
- All staff are trained in trauma-informed care
- All staff have knowledge of local services for women

## Service information

- Our website links to services for women in Brighton and Hove
- Our service is easy to find online and in the city

## Accessibility

- We ensure that women's basic needs are met when they access our service, including food, travel costs and phone credit

## Policy

- We have a policy for working with women, including identifying where there may be barriers to accessing our service and what is in place to overcome this and specific safeguarding processes for women

# 4. Guidance for men working in and accessing drug and alcohol services

## In shared spaces

- Have educational materials up on the wall so all services can see it
- Have information in all shared spaces, to let women know who to talk to if they feel uncomfortable in the shared space
- Not watching potentially triggering programmes or films
- Don't ask women personal questions in a shared space
- Respect everyone in the shared space

## Language, 'banter' and behaviours

- Ensure appropriate and safe behaviour around women in the service
- Be mindful of language. 'Banter' not only alienates women, but other men using the service too
- Inappropriate behaviour towards women can exacerbate trauma and lead to relapse, re-traumatisation or worse. Small things all add up, even the odd 'harmless' comment can lead to women not feeling safe

## Guidance for male workers

- Offer a female worker to do a drug test
- Make sure you have knowledge and understanding about the menstrual cycle and sanitary products. For example, if there is blood in a urine test, this may be because the woman is on their period
- Be aware of safeguarding. In particular, be aware of how to recognise vulnerabilities of women in residential rehab. Even if a woman looks completely fine they may have experienced serious trauma, be trauma-informed
- Be an ally, be aware of how women may experience services and how best to support them

# 5. Information poster

A co-produced poster supporting women in Brighton and Hove who are affected by substances to access support. You can find this on the next page, please put this up in your services and on your website. This is to support women who are affected by substances to take the first steps in accessing services.

## What is the purpose of this poster

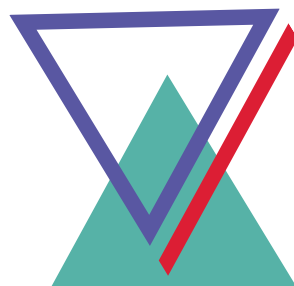
- To raise awareness for women specific routes into services and accessing support
- To encourage women to take the first step to recovery
- To make accessing services easier for women and to make it clear what is available
- To share quotes from women with experience to reduce anxiety and fear of accessing support
- To reduce the stigma and shame women may feel and encourage them to access support

## Where can this poster go?

- In all drug and alcohol services
- On all drug and alcohol service websites
- In GP waiting rooms
- Hospital
- Reception areas in other support services
- In the library
- On community notice boards
- On notice boards on busses
- Local shops
- Coffee shops
- Staff notice boards in businesses

## What should come after the poster?

- A database with information on all women's services and up to date details
- A commitment from services to keep all service details up to date online
- Collaborative working between all services to ensure there are no group timetable clashes
- An online map, with links to all services





# ARE YOU A WOMAN WORRIED ABOUT DRINK OR DRUGS?

Do you, or someone you know, use drugs or alcohol as a way of coping? Is it having a negative impact on your life?

## THINGS CAN CHANGE, YOU'RE NOT ALONE

### **OASIS – WOMEN'S SERVICE**

[oasisproject.org.uk](http://oasisproject.org.uk) 01273 696970  
[info@oasisproject.org.uk](mailto:info@oasisproject.org.uk)



'Oasis kickstarted everything. It was the beginning of my recovery. The change I wanted to get my family back'

### **CASCADE CREATIVE RECOVERY**

[cascadecreativerecovery.com](http://cascadecreativerecovery.com)  
[christy@cascadecr.org](mailto:christy@cascadecr.org)



'For women in all stages of their journey, non-judgemental and completely confidential. If you just want to talk to someone, they listen'

Change, Grow, Live (CGL) offer mixed gender recovery focussed drug and alcohol support in Brighton and Hove.

[changegrowlive.org](http://changegrowlive.org) 01273 731900 [brighton.info@cgl.org.uk](mailto:brighton.info@cgl.org.uk)

If you're feeling low you can call the Samaritans for free,  
24 hours a day, 365 days a year - 116 123

**THIS POSTER WAS CREATED BY WOMEN WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE OF DRUG AND ALCOHOL USE**



# Thank you for reading



We hope that this document will be able to support services and the system to better support women.

The ideas and tools that have been suggested in this document can be tailored for your service.

We want to hear from you. Please let us know how the tools work for you and if you have any ideas for improvement.

Let's all stay connected. If we work together we can achieve more for women affected by substances



The women's group

