



Women's Experiences of the Cost-of-Living Crisis in Northern Ireland: *The Value of Women's Centres*



Context

Women's Centres provide a range of services to low-income women including education and training, childcare, access to advice and information, food and foodbank vouchers and help with clothing, furniture and other household goods. The Women's Centres have been recognised as safe spaces and provide valuable opportunities for friendship and social inclusion, health and wellbeing support including for mental health and the chance to share information and access other sources of help/signposting. The value and centrality of Women's Centres in the lives of women affected by the Cost-of-Living Crisis is evident throughout this research.

Independent analysis by Alma Economics for the Women's Budget Group, shows that the benefits generated by Women's Centres outweighs the cost. The analysis found that a hypothetical Women's Centre provided with a £1m investment could generate £2.75m in socio-economic benefits, including savings for frontline public services and significant gains for approx. 650 women and their children. However, services are currently in a perfect storm of unstable funding, increasing demand and soaring costs at a time when the Cost-of-Living Crisis is further increasing the needs of women and families. The services that Women's Centres in Northern Ireland provide are under significant threat and some Women's Centres have already lost access to funding to provide training and employment programmes. The exponential rise in costs cannot be met within allocated running costs budgets and the Centres have had to rely on their organisational reserves, fund raising and donations to meet costs.

At a time when statutory services are facing significant funding cuts, as food prices continue to rise, as Holiday Hunger payments have ceased, as social security payments continue to be insufficient to meet basic needs, as women face increasing social exclusion and isolation and the gendered effects of the Cost-of-Living Crisis continue to ravage every community in NI (particularly those that are most disadvantaged) the case for protecting our Women's Centres has never been greater.

You can read the full research paper "Women's Experiences of the Cost-of-Living Crisis in Northern Ireland" here: <https://bit.ly/44UPleX>

Findings

Research highlighted the great importance women placed on the services of their local Women's Centres and how critical they were to the health and wellbeing of many disadvantaged and rural women:

- Many women had been able to access support specific to cost of living increases through their local Women's Centre/group, for example, with food and energy bills, household goods, clothing and help with children's costs as well as signposting for further financial help and support.
- Many of the women stated that they felt there had never been a greater need for the services provided by Women's Centres/groups as a result of ongoing welfare reform changes and the impact of the Cost-of-Living Crisis. Many said they would be in a much worse situation if they did not have access to their local Women's Centre/group.
- Some of the Women's Centres provide access to a Social Supermarket which offers discounted food and also a range of wrap around support services and these were highly valued by the women who had access to them.
- Women placed great importance on the services and support provided by local Women's Centres/groups both in terms of material help and also with their mental health and wellbeing.
- These trusted, safe spaces provide a real sense of respite, friendship and emotional support allowing women to share their experiences and concerns with other women.

Recommendations

Women's Centres provide trusted, local spaces for women to access help and support to address financial vulnerability and poverty in ways that work best for them. However, current funding is short-term and doesn't recognise the breadth of work Women's Centres do or the impact that rising costs have on them.

- Government should provide a long-term sustainable funding model which recognises the significant return on investment that Women's Centres provide. This would enable them to continue and develop the vital services they provide to financially vulnerable women and their families in disadvantaged areas.
- Government should resource and develop the Women's Centre Childcare Fund (WCCF) Model which provides integrated childcare and learning pathways for women at community level to improve marginalised women's access to learning and employment and help to address poverty.

Quotes from Participants

*I loved doing the courses at **Waterside Women's Centre** and the crèche was a huge decider in being able to do the courses. My child was safe in the crèche and I really trusted them with him. That meant I had some time to focus on me. Attending courses and coming to the Centre has built my confidence and has been really good for my mental health.*

***Atlas Women's Centre** is literally a godsend. Mental health wise the difference they make is incredible. The Maternal Advocacy and Support (MAS) project in the Centre is fantastic – the children are safe downstairs in the crèche and they get a snack and I get time for me, to focus on myself for a while.*

*I'd be screwed if I didn't have **Ballybeen Women's Centre**. They can sort out foodbank vouchers, gas and electricity vouchers. They can help with so much even just making phone calls on your behalf, filling in forms, etc. Anything to do with my son – I wouldn't be where I am without their help. They helped me get my child statemented, he has so many health professionals involved and one phone call from the Centre and they helped to sort it all out.*

*I come to **Chrysalis Women's Centre** so I'm not putting my own heat on. I'm very grateful to the Centre it provides amazing support in both the things they do and being able to come here, it's a safe space and I don't have to put my heat on.*

*Without **Strathfoyle Womens Activity Group** I would still be too nervous and anxious to leave my home. It has been a lifeline for my family as I moved from a different area and didn't know anyone. It's hard to put into words the emotion of thanks I feel and only wish every mother and woman has access to similar services and support.*

***Footprints Women's Centre** have been brilliant helping with the cost of living like the Social Supermarket. They organise events and bring in holistic therapies and that's good for your mental health and stress management. It's a place where you can come and meet other women, have a wee cup of tea and it doesn't cost you anything – so many women can't go out as they can't afford it. There are trips and things to do and sometimes we get lunch too!*

*My kids got free school meals this year for the first time since I started work because **Greenway Women's Centre** helped me to fill in the form and I submitted the right paperwork.*

***Windsor Women's Centre** is amazing. I was feeling so lonely, it's just me and the baby. I have no family living here and didn't know where to turn to get help but my Sure Start key worker brought me round to the Centre and I joined an art class and my child was given a place in the baby-room. I have made friends and found out about all the different things the Centre has to offer and I feel more hopeful about my future.*

*I've been coming to **Kilcooley Women's Centre** for a few years and have completed lots of courses and increased my skills. The Centre has done a lot for my confidence and anxiety. I really enjoy the courses and meeting new people and the staff are just fantastic. It's a brilliant place with brilliant people.*

***Greenway Women's Centre** keeps you happy and helps with your mental health. Our social life is here. We do day trips, courses, volunteering and some of the courses are free.*

*I left an abusive marriage and received counselling in **Falls Women's Centre**. I enrolled on a course through the Centre which led me to eventually enrol on a Diploma course in Therapeutic Counselling. My life and my children's lives have completely changed. I have seen my skills develop and I am more assertive and optimistic about my future. I hope that I will soon become a qualified counsellor. This is all down to the opportunities afforded to me by Falls Women's Centre and I am very grateful.*

*This is where we find our sanity, we come together and there's no judgement. This is our social life. We'd be lost without **Lenadoon Women's Group**. It's a break from the rest of the world and a stress release. It benefits the kids too as they're in the crèche socialising with other kids. I take my daughter to the crèche here, she gets fed and sometimes we get fed too!*

***Shankill Women's Centre** has been invaluable for me, the last few years have been really tough and I've been awful lonely and isolated. Coming here for classes you feel a sense of belonging, I've made new friends. I wasn't going out all and coming to the Centre was great for me.*

*It's difficult to quantify in words the benefit **First Steps Women's Centre** has made to my life and connection with the local community. Due to attending confidence and wellbeing courses I've gained knowledge, techniques and new friends allowing me to cope better with health and family issues. It has allowed me to meet new people, learn new skills, and has probably been one of the most crucial aspects of bouncing back after COVID and lockdown. I don't know what I would do without the Centre and its fantastic staff.*

*The whole environment of **Women's Centre Derry** is like a family, everyone is made to feel welcome and comfortable. I've been able to add to my qualifications at the Centre which has helped me get a job with better prospects and future for my kids. I was able to build my confidence and get the qualification I needed for my new job. Without the Women's Centre I wouldn't have been able to even think about it as childcare is the hardest thing to get and the crèche in the Centre is a huge help that enabled me to further my education and career.*